



## Change and Dynamism in Theyyam: A Perspective towards Modernism



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### Abstract

One of the most popular ritual arts of North Malabar of Kerala is Theyyam. It is considered as a celebration of God's dance on earth, which is in the vows of protection of evil spirit and showering blessings to those indigenous people. This spiritually addressed Theyyam is undergoing changes due to factors like increased commercialization, shifts in social dynamics and influence of modernization. The identity of Theyyam is transposing beyond its sacredness for economic stability and demand for authenticity and attention. Theyyam ritual demands more time and intense ritual performances, the adaptation of synthetic materials and cut short of intense performances is observed. The destruction of sacred grooves (kaavus), which are integral to Theyyam rituals, is a significant concern, affecting the connection between the performance and its spiritual origins. This paper also observes positive changes like increased awareness and appreciation, its increased visibility has led to greater awareness and appreciation of this unique art form, both within Kerala and internationally. There is Social progress reflecting broader social changes in Kerala, with the diminishing influence of rigid caste hierarchies and increased social mobility. Efforts to preserve tradition by documenting various aspects of Theyyam, including the rituals, stories and the unique makeup and costume traditions are necessary. Theyyam is experiencing a period transition with both positive and negative impacts. While modernization and commercialization pose challenges, efforts are also underway to preserve its cultural and spiritual significance for future generation. This research study undergoes the methodology of Qualitative analysis and ethnographical inferences conducted during field visits, the main aims is to highlight the diaspora of the age-old ritual tradition versus intervention of modernism and its direct implication on the samudhaya (Community) members and the ritual art form.

**Keywords:** Theyyam, Samudhaya, tradition, modernity, ritual dance

### Research Paper

#### Introduction

Theyyam is a ritual dance specific to North Malabar of Kerala, it is a distorted term of Daivam which literally means God in Malayalam language, whereas theyyattam means dance of God. When theyyam is performed in a sacred place, it is called Kaliyattam. Here, the term Kaliyattam is a combination of two words, which means; kali literally means Play and attam is dance. But different scholars opine that, theyyam is a dance of the goddess Kali and some other claims that, kaliattam as dance of kali (Nandakumar: 2019, p.1).

Theyyam is performed in sacred groves called Kavuvu,

tharavadu (ancestral house), kshetram (temple), environmental spaces, and dense forest areas. When theyyam is performed, it is ensured by the samudhaya members that the legacy of ritual practices and traditions are carried out well with the performances. The present day North Malabar districts in Kerala includes; Kannur, Kasargod, Waynad, and Kozhikode. It is performed during the tenth day of the Tulam masam which is a Malayalam month followed in Kerala—on the Tulam pattu. Tulam masam is the harvest season, where all the village communities gather at shrines and forest groves to celebrate the ritual dance in honor of the gods and goddesses (Nambiar: 2022, p.42).

Transformation of the body and mind takes up a major role in theyyam. The body of the performer is transformed from mortal into a divinity. The performer is dressed with colourful or natural organic costumes, enormous headgears, vibrant face and body makeup taking up the roles of gods and goddesses, these overall external appearance allows the performer to transform from normal life to supernatural divine being. The spirit runs throughout his body in the form of divine god or goddess, after the transformation the performer is no longer considered or addressed by his original identity but is seen as a divine character. His ritualised body will be in trance state until the ritual performance is over.

Theyyam is the culmination of divinity through, sacred symbols, patterns, ritual objects, sounds creating vibration, play of natural elements, body movements, theatre, dance, music and interaction between spirited soul and the devotee. It is to be understood that, all these factors are symbiotic relation between ritual and art form. Theyyam has the representation of both Natya and Loka dharmi

This research paper titled: "Change and Dynamism in Theyyam: A Perspective towards Modernism" is the study about how modernity and modern approach are oversharing the local knowledge system and causing distress for its authenticity and sustainment towards fast spread of modernity among the communities. The present study also focuses to highlight the current shift of materials and mediums used for the ritual dance. The skilled craftsmen are left with no choice but to adapt the synthetic materials, and there is a desire for drawing the attention of people, since it's slowly losing its indignity. It is necessary to highlight how onlookers are responding to the tradition and ritual practices versus how the community members look at it. Therefore, this study thus attempts to examine how theyyam ritual performance is shaping according to the adjustments of modernity and how this is affecting the villagers, community members and the ritual form and identity.

### Need for the Study

Theyyam is an overly worked research subject, many scholars and researchers have looked into different perspectives. Specific areas which have been concerned such as political remarks over communities, socio-cultural aspects, ritual ideologies and institution, historical perspectives and aesthetic approaches, lesser known is about how theyyam as a ritual performance speaks for itself and its ideologies and identities. It is important to talk about beyond vernacularity, theyyam is

about culture, tradition, ritual ceremonies, communities, folk narratives but also apart from these the study seeks to throw light on sustainment of the traditional cultural patterns through the vision of modernity. The change in ritual form and slow and gradual adaptation of modern approach is a sure phenomena, but very few attempts have been made in the field of research studies, and not much contribution have been done to identify the loopholes of theyyam in terms of change in tradition and culture. The art form stands sustaining the identity in the modern world and for the onlookers.

### Research Objectives

- To examine the present ritual practice and its withdrawals in terms of cultural patterns in present day
- To understand the change of art form due to the adaptation of modernity
- To study the intervention of modern approaches in theyyam and its cause and effect of the communities and their ideologies.

### Hypothesis

H1: Theyyam ritual have significant meaning behind the use of traditional and indigenous materials.

H2: Theyyam is becoming more of a tourist event than ritual performance.

H3: Modernity and Commercial purpose has become part of ritual tradition in theyyam

### Relevance of the Study

The potential of this study is to mark the remarkable contribution of theyyam for the samudhaya, society, cultural heritage, biodiversity and more importantly the indigenous knowledge practices. The necessity to archive the significant and impactful ritual tradition which leads to the awareness amongs the public with its supportive sacred and divine characteristics. The traditional and scientific approaches towards this ritual performance reveals the symbiotic association between the theyyam communities with coexisting natural environmental settings. This highlights the hidden artistic techniques which echo the influence of nature on face makeup, masks, headgears, costumes and others. How these ritual practices and performances connects the exposures that the ritual performances provides. In spite of this, in recent years, theyyam is undergoing traditional and cultural changes due to the demand in newer approaches towards modernity. the shift in materials and elimination of certain ritual practices are leading to



deconstruction of the ritual performance. These results are culturally and socially impacting directly on the samudhaya and theyyam it self.

### Research Methodology

This qualitative research study employs historical, artistic, sociological and cultural anthropological research approaches and methods to critically examine the primary data collected during field visit. Field survey also included ethno archaeological method.

### Results

**Hypothesis 1:** The relevance of nature is seen throughout the performance. The elements borrowed from nature are directly reflected on face makeup, costumes, headgears, masks and in other parts of ritual practices. The semiotics and thematic visual icons are borrowed from the local environment where the Samudhaya members resides. The close observation of these natural settings are imparted on the body of the theyyam performer. The imitation of flora and fauna through the visual forms and the material used in ritual which are sources and directly extracted from the nature are the inner workings of ritual performance and embodiment of cultural memory. The colour pigments which are used are nothing but borrowings and extraction from natural minerals, costumes incorporates tender leaves and thick cotton cloths, the other accessories are made out of metals, woods and organic materials. Use of these natural and organic materials emits the traditional and indigenous knowledge which has got over the ages of time through rigorous training, experimentations and explorations.

**Hypothesis 2:** Since it is a religious and devotional ritual dance, there is a must to be in the zone of space which talks about history and brings back the cultural memory while conducted the ritual dance. space and time matters in this ritual, like in any other ritual. There is a need of understanding the value of sacred space, natural set up and environmental spaces. Theyyam ritual dance helps in construct and maintain the socio-cultural practices and the identities of the samudhaya. The performance is nothing but the reflections of cultural memory in the form of dance and music. But the uncertainty of struggling to survive the authentic nature of theyyam is misleading the attention from public and from being sacred ritual art form to more of a heritage tourism. Theyyam is travelling across India and losing its sacredness in terms of ritual performance and becoming solely art performance and for the sake of entertainment attract the heritage tourism management.

**Hypothesis 3:** Theyyam is a heterogeneous ritual in nature, it has borrowed influences and has undergone cultural interaction from different castes, communities and traditions. In present day situation, theyyam has been unconditionally moulding itself for the presence of modernity and commercial purpose. Moving beyond its horizon, theyyam is stepping beyond its sacred land and travelling across regions with an objective of being able to recognize by people who are unaware about this ancient tradition. For the popularity and economic support, now theyyam has entered into the realm of commercialism and modernistic approach perhaps in shifting with easy accessible and synthetic raw materials have been incorporated in the mainstream ritual practice. Yet stepping into the realm of modernity, the acquisition received by the ritual performance is supportive and gained much popularity among people from different regions and this reflects the social and cultural outcomes of being commercialised and slowly approaching towards modernity in a good way as well. More popularity and recognition has led to the archiving of the tradition to its best but having said earlier, it is to be noticed that the integrity, moral principles and the sentiments of the samudhaya are being uprooted once the Daivam (God) travels from its original context to the outside world for the sake audiences (and not devotees) of different region, then the theyyam travels as an art form rather than a ritual performance. And when it becomes an art form, it is more liberal and no more discharges the qualities or the significance of ritual aspects. As of now, in several kavus, killing of animals and birds and blood offering is forbidden as a result of the influence of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. There, separate places outside the sreekoil are selected for blood-offering. The traditional ritual outside the kavus is known as vatakkavathil (K, Nandakumar: 2019, p:4-5). Yet again in many cases animal sacrifice has become a sophisticated ritual practice as it demands certain social restriction and has become more of a private costumes. ritual dance has become more of an entertainment event due to many factors such as economic instability, seeking of popularity of patronage, discontinuation of tradition.

### Discussion

The theyyam communities who belongs to Schedule Castes (SCs) and Schedule Tribes (STs), who also takes a vital role and recognised in the Constitution of Indian Articles. The important articles for Kerala's SC & ST are Art. 341 (for SCs) and 342 (for STs), these Samudhayas, are considered to be the protector of traditional and folk ritual of north Malabar of Kerala. Theyyam can



be viewed in many dimensions, since it is culturally and visually rich, many aspects in this performing arts throws nuances of north Malabar oral traditions and folk narratives of the local people and legends they have been followed religiously. When theyyam is given the affinity of sacred ritual art form, the question which should be emphasised is why it is sacred and how the sacredness within the art form is maintained? Every deity in theyyam speaks for its own identity and narrates story and when these deities are embodied by the performer from the respective samudhaya of that deity, the prominent somatic memory is reflected throughout the performance. This is because theyyam refers to numerous spirits, ancient heroes, ancestors and Puranic deities (Ashley, p.100). The super heroes or heroines belonged to specific communities which belonged to the lower strata, having traumatic experiences, struggles and unnatural deaths, these spirits are still worshiped as a sign of remembrance and to bid for their souls as offering. These deities were also powerful and considered to be the protector of the people/community, society and their land, this way the ritual dance takes up a vital role in region and personal life. Some theyyams are commissioned by private families in their own taravadu as a 'vow to god' (Ashley, p.100). The point is, these belief patterns and faith have evolved within a geographical region, and the spaces place a crucial role in theyyam and for the people from north Malabar. The sacredness comes from the space, time and the history behind each deities. The words coming from the mouth of the living god embodied by the theyyam performer are considered as the final words and sacred.

### **Theyyam as a Ritualistic Art Form**

In theyyam, human body is used as a vehicle of expression and communication, when god/goddesses are embodied by the theyyakkaran; he just not becomes the mediator between the metaphor and devotees, but a living god on earth. Ritualistically looking at theyyam, it is one such dance form, where there is involvement of Bhakti, Bhava, Rasa, Shastra and Sampradaya. The performer undergoes a strict 41 days acharya and anushtanam, in which he follows strict diet plan, body training, muscles training, physical exercises, and mental health, following celibacy and quarantine within family. These pre rituals are mandatory for a theyyakkaran in order to achieve the state of trance. The body of the performer has to unite within oneself and have to reach the extra mundane world, to get in contact with the spirits and the Gods, to achieve these circumstances, during the ritual performance, special offerings, animal scarifications,

worshiping the spirits and the weapons associated to the gods/goddesses these rituals are necessary as it adds to the ancestor worship and bowing respect to the practices followed from ages. Different daivams seek different ways of worships and rituals, depending upon the narrative. Tottam chants are beyond sacredness, as the narrates the origin of theyyam and gives a preamble of the ritual dance. These tottams are key element for performer to enhance the aura and energy of the daivam, as it archive of cultural memory and orally transmitted.

The timeline of theyyam is quite debatable, since there is no significant evidence which proves the exact origin of theyyam, but with the attempt of different researchers on different areas in theyyam has given a understanding that, theyyam existed during the 16th century A.D. and before. Durate Barbosa has attempted to record the customs, ritual practices, and the socio-political narratives of Malabar region where he have also tried to capture the vibrancy of theyyam ritual form. Durate Barbosa has stated: "It appears that despite his ignorance and biases, he witnessed (and reported) a remarkable liminal performance drive by flow and the generating of presence, consciousness, and energy. And that is what we may still observe in Theyyam five centuries later", Barbosa in his account also mentioned about a theyyam samudhaya which is the Malayan (Pereira: 2017). Through his account, an estimated theyyam time can be traced back to 15th to 16th century A.D, it can go back to much earlier as well. The origin of theyyam is closely associated with fertility cult and mother goddesses worship. And amma theyyangal (female theyyam/ theyyam of mother goddesses) are the popular ones in theyyam ritual practices, as they hold very significant position as these theyyams deals with fear, diseases, and power of female energy and fertility. No amma theyyams uses toddy or alcohol, which is again part of ritual practices. The transitions in ritual practice over centuries are quite evident, as we cannot speak for those centuries which we haven't eye witnessed, when orally information were passed during the interviews, it is believed that, according to the present contemporary theyyam practitioners, the ritual tradition has undergone tremendous changes, both in the performers view and ritual view.

### **Change & Transition over Period in Theyyam: Through the Perspective of Performers and Spectators**

The trance state of mind and body is achieved by many levels in theyyam. One of the way is from changing



the external appearance of the performer, performer has to undergo the physical appearance through face makeup, body makeup, costumes, huge and enormous headgears and some theyyams demand face masks too (depends on the narratives of the theyyam), these external embellishments reflects on the cognitive psychology of the performer and allows him to reach the level of trance, with the help of sound coming from the percussion of drums (Chanda), talas, Tottam Pattu, and the help of other samudhaya members.

The changes and the adaptation where theyyam has undergone through decades is evidently reflected. According to many senior theyyam artists/performers, the knowledge of theyyam passed down from generations and are orally transmitted and since then there is slight deterioration of the knowledge found among within the communities. Not every samudhaya members are willing to learn the entire process of ritual dance and remember the thottam pattus, many new generations are seeking for normal jobs/occupations which can support families easily and to achieve a standard livelihood. These circumstances are leading to the discontinuation of the traditional practices within samudhaya members. In spite of these unstable situation, the theyyam practitioners are still holding up the ritual and socio-cultural elements in order to preserve and conserve the ancient ritual art forms. The audience or the spectators who are usually the devotees, also prefer to watch and engage with living gods who has more experience in terms of journey in the path of performing the ritual dances.

On the other hand material culture of this tradition strongly reflects the pure understanding of nature and environmental history and the ancient knowledge that these community members have acquired through close interaction with the local flora and fauna. The materials used in theyyam are still natural and organic in nature, but shift in certain elements can be observed, due to many reasons such as, to cut short the lengthy process of procuring natural materials, and to receive quick results. Lack of skill within community members since there is knowledge barrier.

## Conclusion

Theyyam acts as a mirror of North Malabar; this ritual dance is the true face of cultural and social narrative. As it speaks for its people and brings in the cultural memory through its vibrant dance and powerful music, this living tradition of Kerala is evidence in understanding

the nuances of North Malabar in different directions. This dance serves in understanding the generation old rituals, customs, practices, beliefs and traditions through its dance and music which is sung in the form of thottampattu. Though theyyam belongs to ancient period, it has undergone changes and cross cultural interactions in many levels. Looking through a Tradition vs. Modernity, theyyam has transacted itself in many levels. In many cases the performers try to mimic to get into trance to gain popularity, especially when theyyam has adopted for stage shows – dramatic frequency rather than getting into ritual trance. Currently theyyam is in unsettled state- neither it can leave retain its complete traditional valued or it can adopt complete modernity, theyyam is adopting modernity for sustenance of culture, there is discontinuation of family tradition ritual practice within Samudhaya

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