



FROM SACRED GROVES OF NORTH MALABAR TO GLOBAL MARKET: A SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY CONTEXTUALIZING THE CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THEYYAM

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Theyyam is a ritual dance-drama performed predominantly in northern Kerala, India, specifically within the present-day Kannur and Kasaragod districts. Unique to North Malabar, Theyyam is a ritualistic form of ancestor and local deity worship, where the bodies of practitioners serve as vessels for the embodiment of particular deities or spirits. In Malabar, the majority of people, who can generally be categorized as Hindus, irrespective of caste or class, engage in Theyyam worship. The primary venues for Theyyam rituals are the courtyards of the taravad (matrilineal joint family) and lineage shrines in Kerala. The privilege to conduct Theyyam is reserved solely for individuals from the scheduled caste, scheduled tribes, or those considered untouchables. This ritual is carried out by communities such as Vannan, Malayan, Velan, Mavilan, Pulayan, Koppalan, and others, who represent the marginalized segments of society. Nowadays, it could be viewed that Theyyam is gradually transforming from being a ritualistic worship into a stage performance art. This study addresses the transition of Theyyam from traditional sacred spaces to modern public spheres. This study explores how Theyyam has been uprooted from its traditional religious context of Hindu temples and kavus (sacred groves) and planted in commercial spaces as a commodity for tourists. The paper also discusses the context and conditions under globalization that changed Theyyam from a pure art form or cultural practice to a commercialized money-making business model.

Keywords: *Theyyam*, caste, deity, modernity, ritual, exclusion, marginalization, globalization

Introduction

Theyyam is a ritualistic performance that combines dance, music, and religious devotion, creating a sensory spectacle. The striking, exaggerated forms, vibrant hues, rhythmic percussion, clashing cymbals, and piercing wind instruments, along with the warmth from the flares and embers, and the sharp scent of coconut oil fueling the flames, all contribute to an extraordinary experience. It is believed that Theyyam originated from the bhootaradhane, or spirit worship, of the Tulu people in neighboring Karnataka. These performances are held in the Kavus and kalaris of North Kerala, particularly in the Kannur and Kasaragod districts. This area, once part of Kolathunad, was governed by Kolathiri of Chirakkal. Under royal directive, Theyyam master Manakkadan Gurukkal of Karivellur, who is thought to have been a Theyyam artist himself, established the costumes for the 39 different Theyyams. Traditionally, Theyyam performers come from Scheduled Caste communities like Malayan, Vannan, Velan, and Thiyya. Although upper-caste communities typically do not perform Theyyam, they have historically sponsored and supported its rituals. Each community maintains its own Theyyam traditions, performance venues, and ritual duties. Over time, Theyyam has served as a medium for integrating local Dravidian practices, such as animism and ancestor worship, into the broader Hindu traditions.

A key aspect of Theyyam is the transformation of human performers into deities. During the ritual, the performer temporarily attains divine status, becoming a revered medium through which devotees seek blessings, guidance, and solutions to personal issues. Many Theyyams embody local goddesses, heroes, ancestors, spirits, animals, and deified historical figures. Performances typically occur in sacred groves (kavus), shrines, family compounds, or other ritual spaces rather than large temples. The transformation into a deity involves several ritual stages. The visual presentation of Theyyam is intricate and colorful. The costume is gradually assembled with face painting (theppu), body decoration (ezhuthu), ornaments (chamayam), headgear (mudi), weapons (ayudham), and clothing (uduppu). Natural materials like turmeric, vermilion, rice powder, palm leaves,

bamboo, and herbal pigments are commonly used. Red is the predominant color, symbolizing fertility, power, war, and revenge. Various facial designs, masks, beards, and crowns differentiate the specific deities and characters.

Headgear holds particular importance as it signifies the ultimate phase of transformation. Different *mudi* styles distinguish various Theyyams and often feature symbolic designs like serpents, tridents, crescents, and fish shapes. Fire is also crucial in numerous performances, with some Theyyams involving firewalking, flaming torches, or ritualistic interactions with fire. Weapons such as swords, shields, bows and arrows, and scythes represent divine power and protection. The costumes of Theyyam illustrate historical evolution. Initially, they heavily utilized natural materials like coconut leaves, while later versions included cloth garments and more intricate designs. Specific dress styles are linked to certain deities and regional customs.

Theyyams can be divided into five main categories: Gods and Goddesses, which depict Hindu deities and local divine forms; Ancestors, which honor ancestral spirits believed to affect human prosperity and well-being; Heroes and Heroines, which celebrate individuals deified for their bravery, sacrifice, or resistance to injustice; Spirits and Devils, which portray supernatural beings, ghosts, and souls of those who died unnatural deaths; and Nature and Animals, which are associated with sacred groves, animals, and natural forces traditionally worshipped.

Among the numerous Theyyam forms, several stand out. *Ali Theyyam* demonstrates cultural assimilation by including a Muslim figure in the tradition. *Angakaran* represents a warrior deity linked to martial prowess. *Devakoothu* is distinct as it is performed by a woman and is tied to the local legends and ecological traditions of *Thekkumpad*. *Gandakarnan* is renowned for its dramatic use of fire and towering headgear. *Gulikan* blends divine authority, humor, and social commentary. *Kathivannur Veeran* honors a heroic warrior who was deified posthumously. *Kuttichathan* is a formidable Shaivite figure associated with intelligence, rebellion, and supernatural abilities. *Muchilot Bhagavathi* is a fierce goddess connected to ritual purity, tales of injustice, and divine retribution. *Muthappan*, one of the most popular Theyyams, is a hunter deity linked to offerings of fish, meat, and toddy. Even though caste restrictions have diminished and participation is no longer socially mandatory, Theyyam remains an essential cultural and religious tradition. For performers, sponsors, and devotees, it serves as a means to preserve ancestral heritage, uphold community identity, honor deities and ancestors, and continue a ritual practice that has persisted for centuries.

The Theyyam season kicks off post-harvest in October and extends until April or May, concluding just before the monsoon rains begin. This period serves as a time for expressing gratitude and appeasing deities and ancestors for the abundant harvest. However, it is also marked by outbreaks of diseases like chickenpox. Consequently, Theyyams such as *Vasoorimala*, known for protection against such illnesses, hold significant importance in numerous *Kavus*. The Mother Goddess is believed to have the ability to repel malevolent spirits from villages. *Kaliyattam*, an annual Theyyam event, combines ritualistic worship with performance and lasts throughout the night, with *thottams* preceding the Theyyam's transformation into a deity. *Perumkaliyattam*, occurring every five or ten years, features a greater number of Theyyams and spans a week or more.

Caste plays varying roles in India's cultural art forms, with different interpretations across regions. For the upper caste, it serves as a means to assert dominance over lower castes or communities, often as entertainment, contrasting with the preservation of socio-cultural values in traditional art forms. For lower castes, it was a medium to express ideas of liberation and freedom from upper caste exploitation. The marginalization of lower castes by upper caste communities is a recurring theme in these art forms. Kerala, known for its cultural diversity and ethnic variety, is not immune to religious and caste divisions in cultural art forms. With urbanization, the rise of mass media, and other entertainment forms like cinema, radio, and television, the future of Theyyam and its community appears uncertain. Performance venues were neglected as communities shifted to professions such as tailoring, traditional medicine, midwifery/nursing, and government jobs. They adapted to these changes while striving to preserve the artistic and aesthetic aspects of the art form. Their patrons transitioned from the landed upper classes to democratically elected governments, which proclaimed the creation of an egalitarian society as their ultimate aim.

When analyzing Theyyam, it is crucial to consider modernization, social transformations, and market evolution. The Theyyam cult has undergone significant changes. Influenced by modernity, Theyyam's status has gradually shifted from a secondary role to being recognized as a performing art. Consequently, the nature, structure, and composition of its supporters have evolved. Today, Theyyam is increasingly transitioning from a form of ritualistic worship to a performance art showcased on stage. A primary factor driving this shift is the need for survival, as the current economic hardships faced by Theyyam performers compel them to seek opportunities beyond temples, such as cultural festivals and entertainment venues, to earn money for their families. Another reason is the desire to maintain the art form's purity, prompting various individuals and organizations to promote Theyyam globally to gather support for its preservation. This paper examines the shift of Theyyam from traditional sacred venues to contemporary public spaces, exploring how it has been removed from its religious roots in Hindu temples and *kavus* (sacred groves) and introduced into commercial settings as a tourist attraction. Additionally, the paper delves into the impact of globalization on Theyyam, transforming it from a pure cultural practice into a commercial enterprise, and investigates how socio-economic and political changes in Kerala have contributed to this ritual's displacement from its traditional setting, along with the implications for caste communities.

Review of Literature

In his thesis, Freeman (1991) delves into the concepts of sacred power, purity, and violence within the art of Theyyam. He suggests that Theyyam should not be solely understood through the lens of Dravidian and Aryan cultural connections but rather through three distinct cultural influences that have shaped it. The first cultural group involves the Brahmins, which includes classical Hindu deities and the principle of ritual purity. The second group pertains to the Dravidian culture, encompassing

Nayars, kings, and lords, and is characterized by the warrior ethos and the violent worship of the fierce goddess Kali. The third group involves the untouchables, associated with mantravadam, a form of sorcery, and myths about low-caste individuals who died violently due to the caste system and were later deified within the Theyyam pantheon. Freeman notes that although Theyyam is ritualistic and worshipful, its history suggests it may not have always been formal worship as it is today. The study also highlights how concepts like sacred power, gender, and violence in Theyyam can be relevant to contemporary research.

Pallath (1995), in his book "Theyyam: An Analytical Study of the Folk Culture, Wisdom and Personality," provides a summary of various Theyyam performances by Hindu Pulayan and Christian Pulayan. The author compares the two communities based on religion and caste, elaborating on different Theyyam characters such as Pulayanpathi and Pulapottan. This work is significant for current research as it examines how different caste and religious groups perform Theyyam, highlighting both similarities and differences. Pallath also mentions that the myths of Theyyam have raised awareness against the caste system, leading many from lower castes to convert to Christianity for a better life. In this context, Theyyam raises awareness but is not portrayed as a direct means of change.

In "Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India" (2009), Dalrymple delves into nine stories focused on the quest for the sacred in today's India. One story, "The Dancer of Kannur," delves into the dual existence of a Theyyam performer. The author illustrates how, during Theyyam rituals, society views the performer as a deity, but outside these events, he is seen as an ordinary person. This story underscores the complexities faced by a Theyyam dancer, who shifts between two distinct worlds. For two months annually, the dancer works as a prison warden, while for the remaining nine months, he is a manual laborer building wells. During the Theyyam season, particularly from December to February, he takes on the role of a deity. The narrative shows how Theyyam dancers act as intermediaries for villagers to express thanks to their deities for granting their wishes. Despite being from lower castes, these dancers are respected by higher caste individuals, like the Namboothiri, who line up to touch the feet of the Theyyam. This depiction highlights the changing social dynamics and the importance of Theyyam dancers in modern society. The author describes percussionists as "dark-skinned Dalit drummers" and the Theyyam dancer, Hari Das, as a "dark and muscular figure." The term "Dalit" refers to castes traditionally seen as lower. The book humorously portrays Hari Das's experiences, showing how he is revered by Brahmins during his divine role but remains unnoticed when seeking their help. This narrative reflects the ongoing overt and covert caste systems in Kerala society, providing context for the current study.

Rajagopalan's (2012) book "Theyyam: The Other Gods" explores Theyyam as a widespread cultural event that embodies a community's historical narrative, marked by Dravidian practices influenced by Aryanization and religious elements. This ritual form fosters a deep connection with nature and the community. The book draws its insights from travels through the Western Ghats, interacting with dancers, castes, and communities that uphold this tradition. It uncovers various kaavus, forms, colors, costumes, beliefs, and worshippers. The chapter "Life as a Theyyam" portrays the dual roles of individuals from different castes. For example, it describes the life of Vinod, a Theyyam dancer and local postman, and Srinivasan, the caretaker of TheyyamKalari and a peon at Koodali High School. These stories weave together elements of tradition and change, centering them around the ritual of Theyyam.

Current research on Theyyam largely focuses on its ritual importance, symbolism, caste connections, sacred power, cultural history, and the personal experiences of its performers. However, there is a significant lack of insight into how Theyyam is changing in response to shifting socio-economic, political, and cultural landscapes. Studies have not sufficiently examined the demographic and cultural backgrounds of performers in relation to changes over time and space, the movement of Theyyam from its traditional sacred venues to modern public and commercial settings, and the effects of globalization on its commercialization. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research on how social reforms, economic shifts, and political changes in Kerala after independence have altered the traditional caste-based structures linked to Theyyam and affected the livelihoods of performer communities. This study seeks to fill these gaps by examining the changing nature of Theyyam, its shift from ritualistic practice to public performance, the commercialization processes, and the consequences of these changes for caste communities and their cultural identity in present-day Kerala.

Objectives of the study

- To find out and analyse the demographic and cultural background of the art and the performers of Theyyam in relation to time and space shifts.
- To address the transition of Theyyam from traditional sacred spaces to modern public spheres
- To discuss the context and conditions under globalization that changed Theyyam from a pure art form or cultural practice to a commercialized money-making business model
- To examine how the socio-economic and political changes that occurred in Kerala society contributed to the uprooting of this ritual from its traditional context and what are its implications for the caste communities.

Research questions

1. What are the demographic and cultural background of the art and the performers of Theyyam in relation to time and space shifts?
2. How has the transition of Theyyam from traditional sacred spaces to modern public spheres taken place?
3. What are the context and conditions under globalization that changed Theyyam from a pure art form or cultural practice to a commercialized money-making business model?

4. How have the socio-economic and political changes that occurred in Kerala society contributed to the uprooting of this ritual from its traditional context and what are its implications for the caste communities?

Research Methodology: The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology to understand the socio-cultural transformations associated with Theyyam and its performer communities. The qualitative approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and realities of Theyyam performers within their cultural and social contexts.

Tools and Techniques of Data Collection

1. **Interview Guide:** An interview guide was designed to collect data from Theyyam performers for conducting case studies. The guide consisted primarily of unstructured and open-ended questions relevant to the objectives of the study.
2. **Personal Observation:** Personal observations were recorded by the researcher to capture minute details of the field reality and to validate the information obtained through other sources. Observation also enabled a deeper understanding of the performance context, rituals, and interactions associated with Theyyam.
3. **Informal in-depth Interviews:** Informal in-depth interviews were conducted with Theyyam performers. Since many respondents had limited formal education, interviews were carried out using an interview guide rather than self-administered schedules. The interviews were largely unstructured, allowing respondents to narrate their experiences and perspectives in detail.

Sources of Data Collection

1. **Primary Sources of Data:** Primary data were collected from Theyyam performers and audience members through case studies, unstructured interviews, and participant observation.
2. **Secondary Sources of Data:** Secondary data were gathered from books, journal articles, ethnographic accounts, oral literature, archival materials, government documents, petitions, letters, newspaper reports, cinema, and fiction related to Theyyam. Existing literature on the history, culture, anthropology, and social dimensions of Theyyam also served as important secondary sources for the study.

Study Area

The fieldwork was conducted in the North Malabar region of Kerala, specifically in Payyanur of Kannur district and Neeleswaram of Kasaragod district, two important centres of Theyyam performance. These regions have a long-standing association with the ritual and continue to be significant cultural spaces where Theyyam is actively practised. For detailed field investigation, Vellur village in Payyanur and Cheruvathur village in Neeleswaram were selected as the study areas. The selection of these villages was based on their prominence as centres of Theyyam performance and the presence of diverse lower-caste and tribal communities traditionally associated with the ritual. These communities include Vannan, Malayan, Velan, Anjoottan, Kopalan, Pulayan, Mavilan, Vettuvan, and Kurichyan, many of whom continue to perform and sustain the Theyyam tradition.

Discussion

The transformations within Theyyam can be seen as signs of modernization. These changes affect not only social life but also culture, economy, politics, and other areas, all of which have influenced Theyyam. Thus, these transformations can be examined through the perspective of Theyyam. The term Theyyam refers to more than just the performance and costume; it includes the entire ritual setting in which it takes place. Therefore, the sacred groves (Kavus) linked to Theyyam hold significant importance. Modernization has brought notable changes to both Theyyam and its sacred groves. Technological progress has touched every aspect of human life, making it easier to obtain goods and services. Art forms have shifted from being solely cultural practices to incorporating broader social and economic aspects. Due to modernization, many changes have occurred in Theyyam performances and groves. Traditionally, natural materials were used for face painting, but now artificial paints are common. In Theyyams like Gulikan and Pottan Theyyam, betel-nut tree spathe were once used for facial decoration, but cardboard is now often used. Similarly, medicinal flower garlands have mostly been replaced by plastic ones.

The materials used in Theyyam celebrations have also undergone qualitative changes. A Theyyam make-up artist mentioned to the researcher that there was a time when only colors made from charcoal and rice powder were allowed. Nowadays, commercially available colors are widely used. Materials that were once disposable are now being made more durable. For instance, traditional headgear made from softwood and glitter paper has been replaced by metal and painted materials. Similarly, the masks of Pottan and Gulikan, which were previously crafted from areca nut sheaths, are now made with more durable materials. An elderly Theyyam performer, with extensive knowledge of Theyyam make-up and costume preparation, expressed regret over these changes. Another significant change is seen in the production of Theyyam decorations. Previously, these were made by specialized traditional artisans following specific customs. Today, most decorations are commercially available in markets, with small-scale industries producing them on a large scale. Like other Theyyam materials, masks of Pottan and Gulikan are now manufactured using various materials and come in different designs and price ranges.

A significant number of elderly informants indicated that the almost forty-year gap in Theyyam festivities resulted in the loss of numerous traditions. Many Thottams and rituals have disappeared, with only a handful of individuals understanding the meanings behind the symbols and rituals they enact. Informants generally believe that public relations and popular appeal now shape Theyyam rituals. Complete Thottams are rarely sung, and only the most crucial rituals are performed. The fast-paced lifestyle of

contemporary India has also affected Theyyam. Before independence, the dates for Theyyam celebrations were strictly aligned with the lunar calendar. Elders continue to criticize younger artists, arguing that they lack the discipline and dedication required to master the art in all its aspects. The researcher found some truth in this criticism. Since Theyyam offers only seasonal employment, many young performers seek other jobs. While traditional performers devoted themselves entirely to Theyyam and spent the off-season repairing and creating costumes, modern performers often juggle Theyyam with careers such as teaching, policing, and other forms of employment.

Contemporary Theyyam artists often do not strictly follow traditional ritual guidelines. Support from the Government and the Folklore Academy has encouraged artists to continue practicing despite economic difficulties. Extensive media coverage has also increased public awareness and popularity of Theyyam. Academic research has further enhanced its visibility. However, performers remain divided on the issue of commercialization. While some embrace it, others worry that performing outside traditional Kavus compromises the ritual authenticity of the art form. Government initiatives have promoted Theyyam as a tourist attraction and cultural promotion. An analysis of Brahminical hegemony reveals that several socio-historical movements influenced its transformation. Before colonization, Brahminical dominance was deeply rooted. Western education contributed to the decline of untouchability and caste-based discrimination, while indigenous social reform movements further challenged these structures. As a result, the influence of Brahminical hegemony waned, and Theyyam gradually evolved from a purely ritual practice into a recognized art form.

Conclusion

This paper explored the ritual tradition of Theyyam, primarily observed in North Malabar. Theyyam has been categorized in numerous ways, such as a cult, ritual, festival, dance, performance, and art form. The research placed the caste system inherent in Theyyam within historical, cultural, and performance contexts. It also examined how Theyyam evolved from a devotional ritual into a performing art and eventually a marketable cultural product. North Malabar is recognized for its socio-cultural diversity and ecological wealth, with its forests, mountains, valleys, and rivers historically influencing the perspectives of its people. The region has long been marked by beliefs concerning caste hierarchy, untouchability, purity, and pollution. Within this framework, the study investigated both explicit and implicit forms of caste discrimination affecting Theyyam and analyzed the impact of dominant structures on local communities and their livelihoods.

The shift of Theyyam from a religious ritual to a performing art has enabled its current role as a marketable cultural product and tourism attraction. As a result, Theyyam has moved beyond its traditional ritual settings into new social and cultural domains supported by new patrons. Today, Theyyam is showcased in national events like the Republic Day Parade, alongside cultural performances such as Punjabi Bhangra and Naga dances. It has also become part of international cultural exhibitions, ticketed performances for tourists, televised presentations, and digital media platforms. Changes in the social aspects of the ritual and in the performers' subjectivity have facilitated this transition. Theyyam performers are increasingly viewed as artists performing for an audience rather than solely as ritual specialists. Nevertheless, caste remains the central theme of this study. The research's methodological strength lies in its comprehensive qualitative case-study approach, which enabled the researcher to identify transformations within the ritual. This work sets itself apart from much of the existing Theyyam literature by incorporating the lived experiences of performers, their family lives, social acceptance, and everyday realities. Through interviews, observation, and fieldwork conducted both within traditional ritual spaces and beyond, the study traces the changing social position of Theyyam and its practitioners. Viewed within the broader socio-political context, Theyyam has continuously adapted to evolving social realities, transforming from a localized form of worship into a dynamic and marketable aesthetic performance.

Changes in the performers' subjectivity, along with the tensions they face when Theyyam is removed from its traditional context, have contributed to its reinvention and relocation. As Theyyam increasingly becomes part of festivals and cultural events where audiences may be unfamiliar with its sacred significance, new challenges emerge. In such settings, performers must balance two responsibilities: preserving the religious and ethnic roots of the tradition while simultaneously engaging audiences who may not attach any ritual or spiritual meaning to the performance. This negotiation between authenticity and adaptation represents one of the most significant contemporary challenges facing Theyyam and its practitioners.

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