

FOLK RITUAL TO ARTISTIC PERFORMANCE: CHANGING TERRAINS OF THIRAYATTAM

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ABSTRACT

Thirayattam is an ethnic ritual art form of Sothern Malabar region of Kerala, India. It is enacted in the courtyard of sacred groves or “Kaavukal” and village temples of Kozhikode and Malappuram regions between January and April. This divine dance drama is a harmonious blend of dance, songs, instrumental music, martial arts, facial and bodily makeup and rituals. This ethnic folk art is enacted to please the deities using its own typical customs and performance style. Rituals and performances once seen as contradictory have now become complementary to each other due to the changing circumstances of the present era. The current article attempts to trace the transition of this ritualistic folk art to an independent art form in the 21st century. In 2022, P. V. Sadique a trainer in Mappila arts, from Kozhikode performed Thirayattam at a film award ceremony in Kochi. With his performance, the ritualistic performance now gained a secular avatar breaking the long prevailing caste and class norms. The article also ponders upon how Thirayattam performance by Seeta Sathish broke the gender, and caste barriers associated with this art form. On a deeper analysis, it was revealed that the current change was the result of the long-standing efforts of practitioners and academicians to preserve this art form for future generations. The folk ritual which was on the verge of extinction got a new lease of life with its transition to a more secular and popular space.

Keywords: Thirayattam, Folk Arts, Ritualistic Performance, Kaavu

1. INTRODUCTION

Kerala, a state in southwestern India, is renowned for its rich and diverse folk traditions. These traditions encompass various art forms, rituals, music, dance, and other performances that are deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the region. Kerala is known for its rich tradition of classical, folk and ritualistic performances. These performances are often associated with religious festivals, and social gatherings bringing together communities and fostering a sense of unity and cultural pride in them. Such traditions continue to be celebrated and passed down through generations, showcasing the rich cultural heritage of Kerala. Folk arts of Kerala are broadly divided into two categories namely, ritualistic and non-ritualistic. Ritualistic folk arts are traditional artistic expressions deeply rooted in

religious or ceremonial practices. Rituals followed in religions or popular social beliefs acts as foundations of ritual art forms. Motives behind these performances include; attaining prosperity, eliminating evil possessions or diseases and pleasing deities. Very complex tantric rituals are also included in these performances which rejuvenate the participants, apart from providing an aesthetic entertainment.

Ritualistic folk arts include both devotional and magical. Magical folk arts are often related to magic, sorcery and the supernatural. They serve as a means to invoke mystical powers, offer protection, heal ailments and to bring about desired outcomes. This folk-art tradition reflects the human fascination with the mysterious, the unknown, and the desire to connect with the supernatural. Magical folk arts aim at attaining general prosperity of the community through activities including the exorcising of the evil spirit. Pambinthullal, Pooppadathullal, Kolamthullal, and Malayankettu are examples of magical folk art. Devotional folk arts are art forms that are performed as acts of worship or as a means to express faith, devotion, and reverence towards deities or spiritual figures; and Theyyam and Thirayattam comes under this category.

In Theyyam, the performers or artists believe that they become channels for the deities or spirits they portray. Through their performances, they seek to establish a direct connection between the human and divine realms. In both Theyyam and Thirayattam mythological stories, legends, and historical events associated with a specific deity is being invoked. The songs and chants sung during Theyyam and Thirayattam narrate these legends and myths. Both Theyyam and Thirayattam are community centred events in which people from the local community actively participate in the rituals and seek blessings from the deity. These performances evoke a sense of awe and spiritual connection among the audience. Both these devotional folk-art performances foster a sense of unity, devotion and collective worship. They serve as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural and mythical traditions from one generation to another. These performances play a vital role in maintaining the religious and cultural identities of the communities involved. Theyyam and Thirayattam not only provide a platform for artistic expression but also cater a deep sense of spirituality, community bonding, and cultural heritage preservation.

Thirayattam is a performance-centric ritual art form that was part of the nature/ancestor/spirit worship of the indigenous communities of the Malabar region of Kerala. Thirayattam acts as a unifying force among the communities of Kerala as it brings together people from different caste and class backgrounds to participate in the performance; thereby fostering a sense of collective identity and community bonding. Thirayattam provides an opportunity for social interaction, collaboration and celebration, strengthening the social fabric of the communities involved.

Thirayattam is an ethnic ritual art form of Sothern Malabar region of Kerala, India. Even when the precise origins of this folk-art performance may remain shrouded in history, its deep-rooted connection to ritualistic folklore tradition of Kerala makes it significant (Peetambaran, 2017). It is enacted in the courtyard of sacred groves or “Kaavukal” (which are thick vegetations isolated for divine reasons), and village temples of Kozhikode and Malappuram regions between January and April (Malayalam months Tulam to Medam); and is part of the cultural identity and social life of the people of that locale. Thirayattam performance occurs in the open air normally clearing the trees and shrubs near a river or pond or anthills of snakes in the middle of ‘Kaavu’ making it a space where God, man and nature come together. According to popular belief Thirayattam invokes the presence of

gods and goddesses and helps in maintaining cosmic balance. The word Thirayattam means “colourful dance”. This divine dance drama is a harmonious blend of dance, songs, instrumental music, martial arts, facial and bodily makeup and rituals. Even though Thirayattam is similar to ‘Mudiyettu’ of Central Kerala, ‘Padayani’ of Travancore and ‘Kola’ of Thulunad, it is different from ‘Poothanum Thirayum’ of Valluvanad. Customs, traditions and artistic exuberance make Thirayattam unique from other performances.

In Northern Kerala there are specially constructed worship places for Gods and demigods, outside temple premises. Such specially constructed places of divine presence are called ‘Thira’. Mostly; in those Thira’s are placed Moorthy’s of family gods and goddesses of the Tharavadu’s of that particular region, which has myths associated with it. People visit those specially designated places to get solace and peace and to find solutions to their problems. Every year there will be festivals and celebrations in those Kaavu/Thira. As part of the same Kolams of these Moorthy are performed, and such a performance is called Thirayattam (Peetambaran, 2017).

This ethnic folk art is enacted to please the deities using its own typical customs and performance style. The ritualistic aspects of Thirayattam are considered an offering to the deities and an opportunity for spiritual enlightenment. The Thirayattam performer who is wearing the Kolam of the deity move in a trance with belligerent mannerisms and gestures which are believed to be manifestations of the divine. The performance is with the accompaniment of traditional torch light (lighted dry coconut leaves or Choottu) and Chenda a vernacular percussion instrument. Other musical instruments used in Thirayattam are Ilthalam, Thudi, Panchayudham, and Kuzhal.

The first function in the performance of Thirayattam is ‘Nirathinu Panam Kodukkuka’ or giving money to buy make up for the performers. Later the place for performing Thirayattam will be cleaned and decorated, green rooms for the performers to relax will also be made. The performers as well as the musicians will reach the location early in the morning on the day of the Thira festival in order to start the precursory activities of the performance. The rituals include ‘Irunnu Purappadu’ and ‘Kulichu Purappadu’ in which the performers will be taking blessings from elders and will be receiving ‘Vettila’ or betel leaf from the Tharavadu elder. When the performers reach the Thira where the folk art is performed, they enter the green room and perform the ‘Aniyara Puja’ for the Gods and teachers by lighting a lamp. It is believed that with this ritual the divine presence gets into the performer. Elaborate facial and body make up will be done by the performer. With the help of the long hair, anklet, garlands etc the performer gets transformed into the God. Raw rice, natural ink and turmeric are used for facial makeup or ‘Mughamezhuthu’.

Thirayattam performance involve many rituals that has similarities with tribal practices. ‘Theekkanal Nadatham’ or walking through the fire is one such ritual. In this ritual the performer walks on the fire to show the devotees the presence of divinity within him. Similar is the case of the ritual ‘Kuruthi’ or animal or human sacrifice; the ritual is performed to appease Gods. This ritual was prevalent in the Dravidian cult from ancient times as it was performed to please the Earth Goddess after each harvest. Thirayattam is an imitation of theses primitive sacrifices that were part of the Dravidian culture for centuries. In this ritualistic folk performance red coloured water is used instead of blood. The art form’s rituals, costumes, music, and storytelling combine to create a vibrant and culturally significant experience for both its performers and spectators. Through vibrant visuals and energetic

performances Thirayattam captivate its audience and helps in preserving the ancient myths and legends alongside.

The dance movements are energetic and synchronized, creating a visual spectacle that provides a sense of ecstasy and spiritual transcendence. The body of the performer when possessed with the spirit of the deity becomes the site of liminality of space and time, between myth and reality, natural and supernatural, memory and imagination. Thus, Thirayattam draws an effective connection between myth and reality as well as human beings and their God. There are three stages in the festival of Thira and they are Vellattam, Thirayattam and Chanthattam. Vellattam representing the teenage of the deity is usually performed in daylight; wearing only light ornaments accompanied by dance in a slow pace. Thirayattam happens in the light of traditional torch light or “Choottu” at night and represents the youth hood of the deity (Peetambaran, 2017). The performance is dynamic with rapid movements which demand great flexibility from the performer. Chanthattam depicting the old age of the deity is performed early in the morning with light movements and makeup.

Figure 1



Figure 1

Thirayattam is performed to appease divinities and legendary social figures as deities known as Kolam or Moorthy. Mythical deities, vernacular deities and ancestral deities have Kolams. Unique and vibrant costumes and ornaments are being used by performers in disguising themselves as Kolams. Mughamezhuthu (facial painting) and Melezhuthu (body painting) are two major aspects of Kolam costume. Skilled artisans make use of natural items like leaves and bark of bamboo and coconut trees for preparing mask, hair and beards to be used in the makeup. Intricate designs and colours enhance the visual appeal of the performance. The makeup patterns and costumes help to differentiate the various characters and add a mystical element to the performance.

Performances of the Kolams involve the use of imaginary weapons like royal sword by “Bhaghvati”, white-axe by “Veerabhadran” and wooden stick and shield by “Moorthi”. “Choottukali” of Thirayattam is the rhythmic dance with traditional torches in both hands and martial practices alongside. For each Kolam character specific ‘Thottam’ and ‘Anchadi’ or mythological recitation is used. They summarize the myths of these ancestral deities. Thottam Pattukal refers to the songs or chants that accompany the performance of Thirayattam. The songs revolve around mythological and historical themes. Thottam Pattukal play a crucial role in enhancing the narrative and dramatic elements of Thirayattam. They provide a musical backdrop to the elaborate and colourful performance, creating an immersive atmosphere for both the performers and the audience. They provide cues and guidance to the performers, helping them synchronize their movements, expressions and actions during the performance. The songs act as a narrative thread, guiding the audience by unfolding story and connecting different episodes and characters. Thottam Pattukal of Thirayattam embody the cultural heritage, artistic prowess, and devotion of the performers. They showcase the unique blend of music, storytelling, and theatricality that make Thirayattam a captivating and immersive folk-art form.

The Dravidian cult of tree worship and hill god worship are embedded in the folk performance of Thirayattam; which is an expression of the collective self and identity of the oppressed marginalised sections who were its custodians. It was men of ‘Peruvannan’ community who were endowed with the right to perform this ritual art; but with time, men of ‘Panar’ and ‘Cheruma’ group started to perform it as well. Performance is learned hereditarily. It should be taught at the Thirayattam venue by practising “Chootu Kali”. By doing so, the learners will develop an understanding of the Kaavu, its Oracles and Deities and the entire tribal heritage to which it belongs. As an expression of the creativity of the masses, Thirayattam provides agency to the resistance of the marginalized against the exploitative structures.

Thirayattam has played an important role in temporarily suspending the caste hierarchy and to bring in social and cultural inclusivity. In Thirayattam performance people from different castes and communities come together in a spirit of unity and equality. The performers wear masks and costumes that conceal their social identities, emphasizing the universality of human experience and challenging the rigid caste divisions. Stories from mythology and folklore are enacted highlighting the struggles of marginalized communities and advocating for social justice. Thirayattam serves as a platform for the expression of collective grievances and aspirations, providing a voice to those who have historically been marginalized. This ritualistic folk art encourages social cohesion, breaks down caste barriers, and fosters a sense of equality and inclusivity.

In Thirayattam the performances are patronised by upper caste men and performed by lower caste subjects, without dismantling the prevailing caste hierarchy. But things get reversed when the performer is metamorphosed as the divine; the upper caste devotees believe the performer’s dance and words as that of the deity that is acting in his body. In the performance of this ritual art; the patrons, performers and spectators come together in a bond of faith and shared narrative. So, the high caste people bow before the lower caste men while they perform the role of the deity, thus subverting the caste hierarchy (Tarabout, 2005). In this way, even if it is for a short span of time the subjugated, oppressed, downtrodden sections of the society (the performers) who stand away from the mainstream are getting agency and voice.

Rituals and performances once seen as contradictory have now become complementary to each other due to the changing circumstances of the present era. Thirayattam that was over the years limited to the temples and sacred groves is now getting translated into a performance in art festivals. The concept of audience too changed over time. Ritual arts performed to please the deity by the devotee gave way to the artist's performance intending to please the aesthetic sensibility of the Sahrdaya.

Times have changed and today tradition and custom saw a gradual break away as Thirayattam transformed from being a ritual folk art to an artistic performance. With the paradigm shift, even members of Muslim community are given training in performing this wonderful art form. According to Moorkkanad Pethambaran, renowned Thirayattam artist, this was done with the aim of popularizing and preserving Thirayattam for posterity. Thirayattam once seen as a sacred practice has now become a secular performance.

Secularizing Thirayattam helps its preservation and revitalization by making it more relevant and accessible to today's multicultural and diverse society. It enables this folk art to evolve, adapt, and continue to thrive in the changing social and cultural landscape. By secularizing; the art form started to be appreciated purely for its artistic merits irrespective of religious or spiritual affiliations (Kumar, 2022). Adapting themes and narratives that reflect contemporary concerns expands the subject matter of the artform. Opportunities for cultural exchange and dialogue through workshops, exhibitions, and collaborations helps in fostering the understanding and appreciation of this ritual art among different communities.

Today Thirayattam lost its signification as a sacred process of worship to become a pure artistic performance. The alienation of the sacred from the performance of Thirayattam enables the perception of the ritual as an art form, as these performances are made to enter the market through popular culture. Thirayattam has expanded beyond its traditional settings and is performed in theaters and auditoriums now. These venues provide a controlled environment for the performance, allowing a larger audience to experience Thirayattam in a more formal and organized manner. Cultural centers, heritage villas, and resorts include Thirayattam performance as part of their cultural programs to entertain and educate tourists about the rich traditions of Kerala.

In 2022, P. V. Sadique a trainer in Mappila arts, from Kozhikode performed Thirayattam at a film award ceremony in Kochi. He did the role of Kullavan Maladaivangal, Devi and Kudivachamoorthikal on stage. According to his Guru Moorkkanad Peethambaran, it was Sadique's passion for Thirayattam that acted as the main catalyst in this successful endeavor (Kumar, 2022). With Sadique's performance, caste and class barriers and taboos associated with this art form have changed. Thus, the ritualistic performance now gained a secular avatar breaking the long prevailing norms. Sadique's performance was part of long-standing efforts of a group of artists and academics to transform Thirayattam from being a ritual into a more acknowledged art form. What prompted them to hasten such an attempt was the socio-cultural, and economic scenario that exists in Kerala today. There was a tremendous reduction in the number of individuals from Vannan and Peruvannan community who are willing to get trained in this ritual performance. Kaavukal where Thirayattam is performed is fast decreasing. Since the performance is seasonal, the artists get opportunities to perform only during certain months.

At such a juncture, exploring ways to rescue this art form from the threat of extinction were started by renowned artists like Moorkkanad Peethambaran and others. They advocated the need to see Thirayattam not as a mere local ritual, but as

an art form which can be appreciated across the globe. Sadique's performance was a fruitful culmination of such an experiment in making Thirayattam an independent art form. In his performance ritualistic parts were avoided and only the features that demonstrate Thirayattam's artistic value were staged. Efforts by various individuals, organizations and cultural institutions to address the challenges that Thirayattam encounters has led to initiatives like cultural festivals, educational programs, and funding schemes that help to create awareness about the art form as well as to ensure financial stability by providing platforms for Thirayattam practitioners to showcase their talent.

Commercialization of Thirayattam has certain potential drawbacks too. There is a risk of compromising the traditional essence, rituals, and storytelling aspects of Thirayattam. Simplified versions or adaptations that prioritize entertainment value over cultural integrity can lead to the loss of the original character of this folk art. The focus may shift from the spiritual and ritualistic aspects to more visually striking or entertaining elements that can potentially compromise the artistic integrity of Thirayattam. Commercialization of Thirayattam can result in economic exploitation, where artists may not receive fair compensation for their performance and expertise.

Breaking the barriers of gender and caste, Seeta Sathish, a trained Bharathanatyam, and Mohiniyattam artist from Thrissur, became the first female to perform Thirayattam. Superstitions and ritualistic barriers restricted women from entering the realm of Thirayattam for centuries (ARPO, 2023). But now with the transition of tribal ritual art into popular stage performance, enthusiastic and inspired women like Seetha could perform Thirayattam. Moorkkanad Peethambaran who taught Seetha opined that if women can be Oracles or Komaram in the Kaavus, they can perform Thirayattam too. Breaking gender barriers in Thirayattam requires a collective effort from the Thirayattam community, artists, organizations and society at large. By promoting inclusivity and providing equal opportunities, Thirayattam can become a space where both men and women can express their artistic talents and contribute to the richness of the art form. It is only through breaking conventions and change in thought processes that this traditional art form with tribal roots can be preserved and transmitted to the future generations.

Thirayattam stands as a remarkable ritualistic, devotional folk performance that connects people to their religious roots, that celebrates the cultural heritage, and provides a spiritual and artistic experience to the devotees/ audience that transcends time. It is testament to the enduring power of folk traditions and their ability to evolve while retaining their intrinsic significance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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