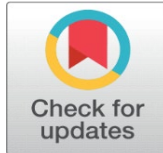
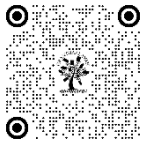


RITUALS OF RESISTANCE: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THEYYAM IN KERALA'S FOLK TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

Theyyam is a distinctive form of worship practiced by the people of Northern Kerala, characterized by a unique blend of symbols, rituals, and art forms, particularly dance. This vibrant ritual, also referred to as Theyyattam, is prevalent in the Kolathu Nadu region and serves as a significant Hindu worship tradition. With roots tracing back centuries, Theyyam encompasses a wide array of customs and rituals that engage nearly all castes and classes within the Hindu community in this area. This art form is not only a spectacular display of dance and music but also reflects crucial elements of tribal culture. During Theyyam performances, both benevolent and malevolent spirits are believed to manifest through the dancers, who embody these divine entities. The practice illustrates the deep spiritual connection between the performers and the deities they represent, showcasing an intricate tapestry of cultural heritage that continues to thrive in contemporary society. This paper offers a critical examination of Theyyam, a ritualistic art form from Kerala with a tradition spanning over a thousand years. The theoretical framework surrounding discourse analysis, which possesses a philosophical dimension, has not been extensively explored within cultural studies. As Theyyam is an indigenous art form that has been the subject of numerous folklore studies, it is rich in discourses that reflect its historical significance and contemporary status as a folk ritualistic practice.

Keywords: Theyyam, Discourse, Thottam Songs, Performance, Rituals, Culture, Myths



1. INTRODUCTION

Cultic and ritualistic practices have significantly shaped the social landscape of India, particularly in Kerala. Among these, Theyyam stands out as a complex ritual art form that defies simple definition. Each Theyyam performance encompasses a blend of pantheistic traditions and caste affirmations, enabling marginalized communities to assert their identity and connection to their land. The Theyyam performer acts as a conduit between the divine and humanity, linking the land with its inhabitants and intertwining ancient beliefs with contemporary experiences. This comprehensive performance is not merely a religious celebration but also a vital cultural expression that fosters unity among diverse communities within Malabar's social fabric. For the people of Malabar, Theyyam is integral to their lives; it serves as a source of solace in times of need, joy, or sorrow, deeply embedded in their collective consciousness.

Theyyam extends beyond Kerala, encompassing 64 villages in the land of Parashurama, including 32 in Tulunadu and 32 in Malanadu, stretching from Korappuzha near Vadakara to Puthoor in Karnataka. A widely accepted legend in Kerala narrates how several Theyyams arrived in Parashurama's land aboard a Marakkalam, a large wooden ship. Even today, the pantheon of gods and goddesses invoked during Theyyam performances remains central to this ritual. The thottam songs, which involve ritualistic chanting of narratives, and the accompanying dances are performed to appease the gods. Offerings are made through manthras and thanthras, with most Theyyams being rooted in Shaivite traditions. The performances honor a diverse array of deities, including Shiva and Vishnu, the Mother Goddess, spirits, animals, and legendary figures from epics. This vibrant display of gods and heroes continues to thrive in the Kavus of Malabar, reinforcing community bonds and transcending social and religious divides through these dynamic performances.

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Theyyam, vibrant ritualistic dance drama is deeply rooted in local myths and legends, depicting stories of heroes, heroines, animals, serpents, and supernatural entities. The performances are characterized by elaborate costumes, dynamic dance, and are typically accompanied by traditional songs and percussion instruments. Theyyam is performed within sacred spaces known as Kavus, where the rituals take place, reflecting a tradition that spans over a millennium with more than 400 distinct types of performances.

Theyyam is traditionally enacted by specific communities in Kerala, who regard it as a hereditary occupation. The term "Theyyam," which can also be referred to as Theyyakolam or Theyyatam, translates to "dance of God" in Malayalam. The major themes of Theyyam performances often revolve around legendary battles, local narratives that resonate with the community, and the elevation of suppressed women into divine figures. These performances are not merely artistic expressions; they serve as a discourse genre that fosters cultural connections among villagers who gather to witness the events. The history of Theyyam intertwines with the Tulu tradition found in the northern districts of Kerala bordering Karnataka, where it is known as Bhoothakola. While the terms "Bhoota" and "Theyyam" have different connotations in Sanskrit, both share a common indigenous essence linked to everyday life. The thottam song in Malayalam corresponds to Pardhana in Kannada, indicating cultural exchanges between these regions. Notable Theyyam figures include Muchilottu Bagavathi, Vishnumoorthi, Pulikandan, Pullikarimkali, Kathivanoorveeran, Puthiya Bagavathi, and Muthappan.

Recent scholarly discourse has examined Theyyam through the lens of Discourse Analysis within ritual studies and folklore. This analytical framework extends beyond mere linguistic analysis to encompass various artistic expressions and cultural practices. Scholars like Marianne Jorgensen and Louise J. Phillip highlight that discursive practices can reinforce power dynamics among different social groups. According to sociolinguist Norman Fairclough, Discourse Analysis involves three interconnected processes: analyzing the text itself (both verbal and visual), understanding how this text is produced and received, and considering the socio-historical contexts influencing these processes. In summary, Theyyam is not just a performance; it represents a complex interplay of culture, history, and community identity in Kerala. As an art form that embodies rich narratives and social commentary, it serves as a vital expression of the region's heritage.

Theyyam marks a significant period associated with the onset of good harvests, symbolizing prosperity and wealth. This season is characterized by collecting the previous year's harvest and offering prayers for an excellent yield in the coming year. It is common for Theyyam performances to take place outside temples and shrines, often extending into paddy fields or even up coconut trees, reflecting local myths. One notable performance involves Ottakolam, where the dancer leaps over fire embers while adorned in a costume made from coconut leaves. Other forms, such as Puthiya Bagavathi, feature performers fastening fire wicks to their bodies and dancing vibrantly.

The physical fitness of Theyyam dancers is crucial, as some performances involve hunting or slaughtering chickens; for instance, Karimchamundi is known for dramatically biting and chewing a chicken, mimicking the mythological narrative associated with that Theyyam. Alcohol consumption is also part of many performances, enhancing the ritualistic atmosphere. The performers embody indigenous deities and engage in various discourses that convey the divine presence to the audience. Communication occurs through music, with traditional instruments such as the chenda (drum) and kuzhal (pipe) creating a powerful auditory experience that transports spectators into an otherworldly realm. As the rhythm intensifies, dancers often lose themselves in their roles, perceiving themselves as gods while the audience reciprocates by addressing them with their problems.

The primary discourses in Theyyam consist of both verbal and non-verbal narratives. The verbal aspect includes thottam songs, which are orally transmitted across generations within Theyyam communities. Critics like Dilip Menon note that many of these songs are composed by community members, particularly from the Malayan community, highlighting a rich tradition of oral storytelling preserved through time. These songs serve as a means for marginalized communities to express their spiritual beliefs and connect with broader societal issues. The rhythm of Theyyam performances varies depending on the specific type of Theyyam being enacted, with some performances being continuous while others are shorter but equally impactful. Each performance conveys unique concerns related to its mythological background. The elaborate body and facial decorations used during performances are crafted from natural materials like turmeric powder, rice paste, coconut oil, and various plant leaves. Costumes are made from coconut leaves and adorned with bronze ornaments, while headgear varies significantly in size and design. In this discourse, the performer acts as a mediator who transforms from human to divine. The success of a Theyyam performance relies on collaboration among the organizing community, the performers themselves, and an engaged audience. The main performers typically belong

to lower caste communities such as Vannan, Malayan, Pulayan, and Koppalan. The performance embodies myths that reinforce cosmological laws while asserting that humanity holds divine power within itself.

Theyyam performances reflect the social systems and structures prevalent in North Malabar at various historical points. This art form serves as a voice for marginalized groups—specifically the avarnas or lower castes—who use it to articulate their spiritual beliefs by associating themselves with deities or ancestral spirits. Various rituals like Kaliyattam, Perumkaliyattam, Thira, and Vadakkemvathilare conducted by communities such as Thiyya and Vannan in sacred spaces known as Kavus. In this context, common people become active participants by presenting their issues to the Man-God embodied in the performer. The Man-God figure serves as a healer for individual and communal problems, fostering emotional connections between audiences and performers. Given that performing communities often belong to lower social strata within Kerala's caste hierarchy, Theyyam becomes a powerful discourse that highlights indigenous issues rooted in heroic myths. While higher castes may seek to claim credit for these performances, the artists remain marginalized within the social structure.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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None

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