



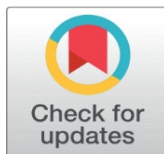
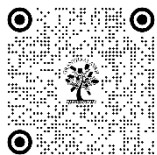


# THEYYAM: A PERFORMER'S JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION FROM MAN TO GOD

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## ABSTRACT

Theyyam or Theyyattam is a performer's artistic journey of transformation from mortal man to immortal Gods and Goddesses. It is a resplendent melange of religious and artistic facets which elevates the aesthesia of both performers and spectators to greater depths. Though Theyyam is fashioned on the essence of a tribal culture, it embraced many elements of ancient Hindu mythology. The entire Theyyam ritual is a metaphysical means, which is thought to have the power to summon the Theyyam deities, causing them to emerge with all exuberance. 'Thottam' songs, the ritual songs of the Theyyam, render the story of the deity propitiated in this ceremonial performance. The performer himself sing the Thottam songs, so that he can get in the exact frame of mind and the necessary spirit of the persona he is presumed to embody. The aficionados observe the rites very closely as the performer performs before and along the shrine. The musical instruments are played in time to the performer's movements making the performance pious. Gradually, the performer becomes completely absorbed, evolved and transcended into the realm of intangible powers of nature, impersonating the Gods and Goddesses through artistic acts and manifesting his supreme power by strange demeanor. The article examines the practices, traditions, impersonation, myths, and legends of Theyyam and some of its most popular forms and how this ritualistic art form has established a legacy across tribal and non-tribal cultures creating an identity for itself.

**Keywords:** Theyyam, Ritual, Performer, Transformation, Thottam, God, Myth

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Theyyam* is a ritualistic dance of North Kerala, performed particularly in Kannur and Kasaragod districts. The term *Theyyam* is a demotic form of *Malayalam* word *daivam* designating God. It is a conglomerate of chants, dance, music and obeisance and reflects traits of tribal life and culture. The historical text *Keralolpathi* describes the origins of the ceremonial art of *Theyyam*. According to the text, Sage Parasurama, the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu granted ritualistic festivals such as *Kaliyattam*, *Puravela* and *Deivattam* to the people of Kerala. He allocated *Theyyattam* to the aboriginal tribal communities like *Panan*, *Velan* and *Vannan*. *Theyyam*, being a social ritual served to bring society's members together. Through their faiths, worship and

customary observances a mutual concord, decorum and social equilibrium were retained. As it is noted by veteran theatre person Kavalam Narayana Panikkar:

In *Theyyam*, the ritualistic dance, we find how the primitive man transforms his life experience into metaphysical thoughts through rites and rituals and identifies his abstract visions in a concrete design, attributing multiple forms to them. It is the worship of the spirits by invoking them to the mortal body of the dancer who impersonates them and gives blessings to the believers. (26) [Panikkar \(2012\)](#)

Kerala's, the southern state of India's, rich social and cultural history shapes artistic traditions and performance. *Theyyam* can be regarded as a possession trance that involves transformation of consciousness, of identity and bodily changes. In the ritual context, "possession trance includes the shared belief that such changes result from the takeover of the body and person of the actor by another entity – a spirit, an ancestor, another living person or even an animal. The self of the actor is in abeyance and the behavior presented is that of the other, so that major transformations are accepted" (559). [Bourguignon \(2004\)](#) "Possession trance for the most part involves the impersonation of spirits by human actors. These spirits may be ancestors, foreigners or other humans, animals or spirits that had been never embodied in human or animal form. An inspection of spirits represented in possession trance rituals reveals for the most part, it appears, a symbolic rendition of human society" (22). [Bourguignon \(2004\)](#) The components of this symbol system are an array of various symbolic gestures or symbols. Thus the possession rituals, a component of human society, expresses symbolic meanings in a way that the masses can easily comprehend.

The performance of *Theyyam*, which is commonly known as *Kaliyattam*, does not take place in temples, which are apparently elite class religious constructions. The personal preferences of landlord-chieftains were much more likely to be reflected in temples' interpretation of God's will than those of the working class. Though temples are the chambers of spiritual rituals, the performer or dancer performs in specially designed divine spaces called *Devasthanam* (*Pallyara, Thaanam, Mundy, Madam, Kottam, Kazakam*) or in *Kavu* (groves) or in *tharavadus* or *illams* (the courtyard of ancestral houses). The ornate rituals performed in the shrines are designed to invoke the favour of Gods and Goddesses. It is an offering for preventing illness and dangers, getting rid of evil eye, gaining progeny, wealth and fruition of wishes. The performer's maneuvers are rooted in indigenous rituals and they imbue their performance with heart and soul. The Brahmins, who were at the crest of hierarchy, also worshipped the *Theyyam* Gods and Goddesses and built their own shrines and groves for *Theyyam* deities with non-Brahmanical ceremonies and traditions. [Alexander \(1991\)](#)

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the article titled 'Carnavalesque, Liminality and Social Drama: Characterising the Anti-Structural Potential of *Theyyam*', the authors [Raisun & Pandya \(2021\)](#) consider *Theyyam* performance as a reflection of the war cry against caste system and oppression prevalent in the social hierarchy of Kerala. The article enquires about the anti-structural characteristics exhibited by the performance of *Theyyam* based on the concepts of Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnavalesque and Victor Turner's Liminality and social drama. The authors conclude that *Theyyam* symbolises and reflects a counter-culture against the social structure through status reversal and inversion. A critical reading of the work shows that it mainly focusses and views *Theyyam* performance as an anti-social structure exhibited by the marginalized

people among the caste Hindu hierarchy. Beyond this, the cultural identity, artistic, aesthetic and creative contributions of the ritual art of *Theyyam* have not been considered and these gaps are being attempted to discuss in the present study.

In an article by [Mohanam \(2021\)](#) titled 'Sounds from a silenced divinity: the interaction of caste with music in the *Theyyam* rituals of Kerala', the author analyzed the extent to which casteism influences the socio-political dynamics of Kerala. Through ethnomusiological analysis, the musical elements of *Theyyam* are compared to the forms of music practiced by the upper caste communities. The author concludes that knowledge in essence, is a product of social hierarchy and forms of expressions are subtle representations of social discrepancy. This study is limited to a comparison of musical elements and instruments used by the different classes in society while performing the ritual art, *Theyyam*.

In another article titled 'The *Theyyams* of North Kerala: The Little Gods of Little Kingdom' by [Geetha \(2022\)](#), the author holds that the cult of *Theyyam* is built upon the tribal belief in ancestors and heroes and the *Theyyattam* is a way of respecting heroes who stood against injustice in society and became martyrs for upholding virtues. The author further observes that *Theyyams* are non-Aryan conventions and divinities worshipped in Northern Kerala, but the rituals performed both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical are identical in nature and they do not feel that their *Theyyams* are inferior to the other. On a critical evaluation, it appears that the study is based on the historical perspective of *Theyyams* rather than discussing from the performative level.

The author [Chandran \(2016\)](#) in her article titled 'The *Theyyams* of North Kerala: The Little Gods of Little Kingdom' discusses three *Theyyams* namely Pottan *Theyyam*, Manakott Amma *Theyyam* and Vishnumoorthy *Theyyam* and the mythical beliefs involved in these *Theyyams*. The analysis is based on the concept of Bultmann's demythologizing myth and perceive *Theyyam* performances as symbols of the travails of the downtrodden. The author concludes that myths are more or less served as justification for the glorification of ordinary human being, but Bultmann's theory changes this aspect of myth. From the critical point of view, it could be seen that for Bultmann myth has no scientific value and truth and hence he strived for the demythologization of myth. The *Theyyams* in Kerala are institutionalized practices and beliefs and as such the demythologizing theory could not make any impact on such practices. [Ashley \(1979\)](#)

### 3. OBJECTIVES

The objective of the study is to shed light on the different phases through which the theyyam performers transform themselves in their journey from a human being to God from the perspective of the ritual performance tradition and its socio-historical background. In spite of the fact that the temple groves where the *Theyyam* is mostly performed are shrinking in numbers, the artistic excellence and the performative brilliance of the ritual art still invite the attention of aesthetic scholarship across the globe to conduct more deeper studies on the subject. The study also aims to create an awareness of the aesthetic value and a better understanding of the performing art of *Theyyam* among the readers and scholars alike so that the art form could be promoted and preserved from extinction. [Damodaran \(1998\)](#), [Brown \(2003\)](#), [Boddy \(1994\)](#)

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research adopts qualitative methodology and used both primary and secondary sources of data to study and analyze the different forms of *Theyyams* performed in the shrines and groves of the northern region of Kerala.

#### 5. ANALYSIS

*Theyyam* translates directly to God and *Theyyattam* to the dance of the Gods. *Theyyattam* is an amalgamation of dance, mime, music (traditional musical instruments like *chenda*, *cheenikuzhal* and *ilathaalam*, will be played), vocal recitation, bright coloured yet intricate makeup and indigenous costumes. The exuberant headgears and broad circular skirts are its distinguishing attributes. Thus in form and artistry, there is diversity. Dr. M.V. Vishnu Namboodiri states that “the facial decoration of *Theyyam* comprises of two stages- *thep* (smearing) and *ezuthu* (picturing). Besides these, there is decoration of body too. There are varieties of *mukhamezuthu*. The artists give various names to these paintings. As colours manayola, chayilyam, turmeric red and rice powder are used” (47). [Namboodiri \(2012\)](#) “Seen in this light, painting the face in *Theyyam* is not merely to make it stylistically on a par with the embellishment of the total form, but more significantly it fulfils the endeavor of transforming the impersonator from the real to a mythical persona” (62). [Chandran \(2006\)](#) Dr. A.K. Nambiar, in his essay, ‘The process of Deification and the Role of Masks in *Theyyam*’, argues that “In *Theyyam*, the body is completely masked and transformation into a non-human or supernatural being is intended by the body-mask . . . there is no acting in *Theyyam* but only ‘being’ and ‘becoming’” (71-73). [Nambiar \(1997\)](#) This completely concurs with Emigh’s observation that, “For the dancer and his audience, of course, the animate nature of the mask is not illusory, but active and participatory. Experimentally, map and territory have become one; within the frame of the dance, the dancer has become what he represents” (19). Emigh (1996) Thus in *Theyyattam*, the performer’s body is sublimely masked and decorated with paint which aids the performer’s transformation into deity, which is an integral part of *Theyyam* performance. [Nambiar \(1996\)](#)

Prefatory rites have prime significance in the process of ennobling to the position of God in *Theyyam*. After accepting Betel leaves, arecanut and rice in a banana leaf (*Adayalam Vangal*), the performer is required to perform the *Theyyam* in the particular shrine in the specified day and time. He then gets mentally and physically ready to perform the *Theyyam* that has been assigned to him. On the day of performance, the performer receives *Deepavum Thiriyum* in a *Kodiyila* (lit wicks held in a banana leaf), from a Brahmin priest through a mediator. Nambiar recognizes this as a “symbolic act in which the *poojari* invokes the God into the lighted wicks and gives it to the performer [and] this has to return to the priest after the performance in the sense that the spirit of the God is given back” (73-74). [Nambiar \(1997\)](#) What follows is *Thidangal* or *Varavili* which is also known as *Kavunarthal*. It is the invocation song or intense summoning of the *Theyyam* God. Thereupon, either *Kulichu Thottam* (recitation of lengthy *Thottam* songs) or *Vellattam* (recitation of short and condensed *Thottam* songs, dance gets more importance in *Vellattam*) occurs. *Kulichu Thottam* or *Vellattam* is the recitation of the specific ritual song or ballad that recounts the myths of the shrine's deity to be propitiated. “In general, the heroes or victims in the *tottams* of *theyyam* either transform themselves as *theyyam* after their death, or they are being rendered in

*theyyam* as expiatory act for the calamity that ravages the village as a consequence of their victimization. The atonement is performed in conformity with the traditional pattern prescribed by the *kanisan* village astrologer. This is the usual process of deification as narrated in the *tottam*" (52). Chandran (2006) *Vellattam* is recited only for male Gods by the performer's accompanying people and *Kulichu Thottam* is recited for both male and female Gods by the performer himself. *Thottams* lasts from thirty minutes to four or five hours. This too makes it possible for the performer to enter the deity. Rendering of rhythmic phrases, incantation and *Thottam* songs empower the performer to attain a psychological state of association with the deity. Performances, whose traits of reiteration, cadency, hyperbole, description, and spectacle create an immediate feeling of pleasure, ease individual and communal anxieties and generates a powerful aesthetic milieu and mood for the audience. That being so, performance is involvement "a journey, a test (of self, of suppositions about others), a ritual passage, an exposure to peril, and an exposure to fear" (226). Turner (1985)

The next stage is the most essential and ultimate juncture of transformation, that is, *Mukha darshanam* (looking into the mirror). Once the makeup and masking is finished, the performer looks at himself in the mirror, in front of his audience, and identifies himself with the *Theyyam* and rapidly goes into a trance like bodily quivering, culminating in the transformation into the *Theyyam* or deity. According to Panikkar, the *Theyyam* dancer travels through three stages:

The dancer in *Teyyam* while passing through the metaphysical experience and getting himself possessed, traverses through three stages; first being one of impersonation which is the negation of his own self and affirmation of something that will help him to affront the supra-sensible vision. The grotesque mask gives him a new personality (in Latin 'persone' means mask) which is far from the reality. The second stage helps him to evolve a mental state of flight to mystic heights before which the dancer takes a look at the mirror, which is a meaningful ritual, indicating that he gets convinced about the identity of the deity (*Teyyam*) which he impersonates. The last stage of impersonation signifies the processed state which is energized fully by the rhythmic accompaniment. The whole physique and the psyche of the performer get possessed by the mood of the character which he impersonates. His demeanour is not only adjusted to a special rhythm, but also his utterances attuned to a totally non-realistic, beyond-the-consciousness level. The dancer has to prepare his mind and body to entertain the *Teyyam* within himself. (31) Panikkar (2012)

The dancer's goal is not just to transform into the deity represented by their character, but also to bring in the viewers very close to their gods and goddesses by the goodness of their impersonation, blurring the boundaries between mankind and divine. Thus, *Theyyam* can be seen as a sacred journey of metamorphosis of a skilful and zealous performer from a finite being to the truly Infinite God. Fogelin (2007)

*Perumkaliyattam* is the performance of *Theyyam* which comes about once in twelve years or twenty-five years or at times more than that. *Kaniyan*, a lower caste astrologer, carry out *Varachu Vekkal* to determine the *Koladharis* or performers. After ascertaining the *koladharis*, they are summoned to the shrine's premises for granting them *Adayalam Kodukkal*. Since then, they should cover their head with a *mundu* (white dhoti) and are required to stay nearby the shrine refraining from all worldly pleasures. Thus, during the period of asceticism, the performer centralizes his tutelary deity with intense holiness and devotion. Gardner and Maier (1996)



Customarily, the male members of indigenous caste groups like *Vannan*, *Malayan*, *Chingathan*, *Mavilan*, *Velan*, *Pulayan*, *Munnoottan*, *Koppalan* (*Nalkathaya*) and *Panan* do the *Kaliyattam*. T.V. Chandran notes that "apart from the performer-castes, every caste of Hindu community is the patron of the *Theyyam*. Some of the major castes like *Nayars*, *Thiyyas*, *Vaniyas*, *Chaliyas*, *Asaris*, *Musari*, *Maniyani* have their village shrines where yearly performance of *Theyyam* is conducted" (75). Chandran (2006) *Devakoothu* is the only woman *Theyyam* in North Kerala. It is performed at *Kunjimangalam Thekkumbad Koolom Thazhekavu* in Kannur district. The lady dancer too follows rigid pre - performance practices. Another appealing *Theyyam* of North Kerala is *Mappila Theyyam* (Muslim *Theyyam*), which discloses the love and peace exist among people regardless of their religion. The *Mappila Theyyams* like *Aryappunkanni*, *Bappiriyan*, *Ummachi Theyyam*, *Aali Chamundi*, *Mukri Pokkar*, *Kalanthan Mukri* were propitiated and impersonated in Hindu shrines. It is performed by *Mavilans*, *Koppalans* and *Vannans* of North Kerala. Although *Theyyam* is a conventional Hindu ritualistic art form, it honours social cohesion by embracing Muslim figures. Harner (1973)

### 1) Some Popular Forms of *Theyyam*

#### • Vishnumoorthy *Theyyam*

Vishnumoorthy *Theyyam* is the rendition of Vaishnavite cult. It recounts the tale of the *Asura* king 'Hiranyakashipu', his son 'Prahlad', an ardent follower of Lord Vishnu and 'Narasimhamoorthi', the fourth avatar of Lord Vishnu. Hiranyakashipu persuaded his son Prahlad to oppose Lord Vishnu but he failed and the *Asura* king becomes so angry and decided to kill his son. But Lord Vishnu protected his devotee every time. Hiranyakashipu extremely irritated by his son's assertion that his Vishnu is Infinite and supreme, asks his son if Vishnu is in the pillar. Suddenly, the pillar shattered with a thunderous boom and Vishnu materialized there in the form of Narasimha and destroyed Hiranyakashipu. Thus the myth as a whole demonstrates the triumph of devotion against evil and profane. In Vishnumoorthy *Theyyam*, Vishnumoorthy is the deified form of Palanthai Kannan. Kannan, an orphan *Thiyya* boy was an extreme devotee of Lord Vishnu. The poor lower caste tenant boy was often maltreated by upper caste feudalist Kuruvat Kurup. One day, in a fit of rage, he murders Kannan which invited Lord Vishnu's rage. Subsequently, Kurup's family suffered numerous woes. Deeply regretted and annoyed Kurup resolved to honour Kannan as Vishnumoorthy *Theyyam*. The dance is performed by *Malaya* community. Vishnumoorthy enters into pyre and returns amidst the devotees (*Agnipravesham*) which is known as *Ottakkolam* in Kasaragod and *Theechamundi* in Kannur districts.

#### • Karimchamundi *Theyyam*

Karimchamundi *Theyyam* performed in North Kerala, is the manifestation of Supreme power. Among all the *Theyyam* Goddesses, Karimchamundi is regarded as the scariest Goddess. Karimchamundi was the one who murdered Mahishasura, a bestial *Asura* king in Hindu mythology. Lord Parameshwara, in fulfillment of her request, granted Karimchamundi, an abode named *Kozhithavalam*. She rambled there all the time and people were frightened to move across that place. Later, the people realized that the terrible form was Karimchamundi. Eventually, in accordance with an astrologer's advice, the people placed the Goddess on 'Payath Hill' and assigned *Peruvannan* to do the *Theyyam* of Karimchamundi.

Another legend prevailing in North Kerala about the Karimchamundi *Theyyam* is the tale of a Muslim man named Aali and his pregnant wife who were fiercely killed by an ogress. The ogress in guise of a midwife ripped his wife's belly and drank her blood. Grief-stricken Aali attacked the ogress with an iron pestle and the injured

ogress ruthlessly slaughtered Aali too. The ogress' atrocities repeated and the terrified people approached their Chief. He commanded to build a shrine for the ogress and from there the ogress took divine form. *Vannan, Mavilan, Pulayan* and *Malayan* are entitled to perform Karimchamundi *Theyyam*.

- **Bhairavan *Theyyam***

Bhairavan *Theyyam*, a prominent *Theyyam* of North Malabar is linked to the Shaivaite cult. Bhairavan is the ghastly form of Lord Shiva. Maheshwara, in order to recompense his error of beheading Brahma (the first god in the *Trimurti* cult, according to Hindu mythology, others being Vishnu and Maheshwara) becomes a beggar and a vagabond named Bhairavan. Thus being a form of Maheshwara as a beggar man, the Bhairavan *Theyyam* is known as being conceived by the Lord for eradicating the pride and arrogance of human beings. This *Theyyam* is mainly performed by the *Malaya* community and in the performance, the dancer's eyes are concealed with a silver coloured eye mask. Even though the dancer would be able to see only through a thin slit in the eyemask the *koladhari* or the dancer rotates with wrath.

- **Muchilottu Bhagavathy *Theyyam***

Muchilottu Bhagavathy is *Vaniya* community's patron Goddess. According to the legend, Bhagavathy was a Brahmin girl born in 'Perinchallur', Muchilottu village whose intelligence intimidated erudite Namboodiri men. Hence, the agitated and jealous male scholars devised a scheme to defeat and humiliate her. The men grilled her asking two questions-which was the most significant emotion and what was the highest pain known to mankind. She answered romantic love as the most passionate emotion and labour pain as the greatest pain. The scholars scorned her and asked one another, how a chaste girl could respond to these questions flawlessly. So they stamped her as impure and banished her from the community. The severely distressed girl decided to end her life and arrived at 'Karivellur temple' and made a funeral pyre for her. She then jumped into the pyre but the flames were insufficient. Immediately, she noticed a *Vaniya* boy who was carrying an oil container. Bhagavathy commanded him to spill the oil on the pyre. Though the boy defied, she insisted and ultimately she made him obey her command. She then jumped into the pyre ending her life. The *Vaniya* boy who witnessed the act discarded his oil container and turned back home. When he arrived home, he was astonished to see his container restocked with oil. The news spread among the people and they discerned the girl as Goddess Bhagavathy, the Goddess of wisdom and riches, incarnated on earth and the *Vaniya* community deified her as 'Muchilottu Bhagavathy *Theyyam*'. This *Theyyam* is mainly performed in 'Muchilottu' temples by *Vannan* community. 'Kaniyal Bhagavathy' and 'Keezhala Bhagavathy' were based on Muchilottu Bhagavathy legends.

- **Gulikan *Theyyam***

An incarnation of Shaivite strength, Gulikan *Theyyam* tells the legend of Markandeya, son of Mrikandu, a witty and pious boy and an extreme devotee of Lord Shiva who had just sixteen years of life on earth. Markandeya came to know this through his father and decided to build a Shiva Linga on the sea shore and worshipped Lord Shiva all through the day. When Yama (the God of death in Hindu mythology) came to take the soul of this young boy on his sixteenth birthday, the boy grasped Shiva Linga firmly and chanted Shiva mantras. Yama hurled his looped rope (*yamapasham*) which encircled Markandeya's neck as well as the Shiva Linga. At once, Lord Shiva emerged with trident in his hand, from the Shiva Linga which has split into two parts. Maheshwara opened his *Thrikkannu* (third eye situated at the centre of His forehead) and kicked Yama so vigorously that Yama fell off to the

edge of the earth. After God Yama's demise, there was no death in the earth and everyone grew older and weaker and so, in order to put an end to this, Lord Shiva pressed His thumb and Gulikan emanated from His thumb. Maheshwara sent Gulikan to earth granting him the responsibilities of God Yama. Gulikan *Theyyam* is one of the most enthralling *Theyyam* forms of North Kerala. *Kula Gulikan, Thekkan Gulikan, Vadakkan Gulikan, Karim Gulikan, Kara Gulikan, Umatta Gulikan, Marana Gulikan, Mantra Gulikan* are some of the different forms of Gulikan *Theyyam*. Gulikan *Theyyam* is performed by *Malayan, Pulayan, Nalkathaya* and *Mavilan* communities.

- **Pottan *Theyyam***

Pottan *Theyyam* is one of the most charismatic *Theyyam* forms of North Kerala representing the Shaivite concept. It deals with the futility of caste system and equality and dignity of human beings. According to the legend, Lord Shiva wished to test the Advaita Vedanta scholar Shankaracharya's wit and virtue before he attains *Sarvanjapedam* (the pinnacle of wisdom). Hence, Lord Shiva approached him in the guise of *Pulayan Pottan*. Shankaracharya, upon seeing the Dalit *Pottan* coming towards him, failed to maintain his composure, roared with rage and commanded to move out from his way since the upper caste scholar did not want to be contaminated by this lower caste member. But *Pulayan Pottan* was not willing to walk away from Shankaracharya's way. They got into a dispute in which *Pulayan Pottan* condemns the wickedness of caste system which splits man. He adds that we all have red blood gushing through veins regardless of religion, caste and gender. The diligent words of *Pulayan Pottan* made the Vedic scholar perceive that it was Lord Shiva who was testing his intuition and generosity towards humankind. *Pottan* is a dynamic and powerful deity and is revered by all communities and the performance is done by *Pulaya, Malaya* and *Mavilan* groups. Moser & Knust (2017)

## 6. DISCUSSION

Ritual works as a mode of operation, devised and enacted to make itself communicative – to exchange thoughts and ideas. “Rituals are episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication’s symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another’s intentions. It is because of this shared understanding of intention and content and in the intrinsic validity of the interaction that, rituals have their effect and affect” (527). Alexander (2004) Man designed the ‘social drama’ *Theyyam* to defy discrimination and imparity in society. It defines, upholds, or challenges social orders that are frequently understood in terms of dominance and servility. Regardless of caste and social standing, an outcast performer can enter a Namboothiri house in the form of *Theyyam*, which is else addressed with harsh punishment. It becomes feasible in a society which had immense religious needs, reverence for impersonality and belief in transformation. Therefore, rigid caste laws are largely suspended in *Theyyam*. Penner (1985)

As Turner contends, “a social drama is initiated when the peaceful tenor of regular norm-governed social life is interrupted by the breach of a rule controlling one of its salient relationships. Since social dramas suspend normal everyday role-playing, they interrupt the flow of social life and force a group to take cognizance of its own behavior in relation to its own values, even question at times the value of those values. In other words, dramas induce and contain reflexive processes and generate cultural frames in which reflexivity can find a legitimate place” (83) Turner (1979). Social drama is the substance for performances that engage in critical



reflection on the nature of the social interaction. Rituals are not merely reflections or depictions of social life and people's concerns. Rituals offer a platform for discourse as well as contemplation, which enables discussions about a shared understanding of social reality. [Quack & Sax \(2010\)](#)

An important aspect of the tribal religious system is the ritual impersonation of supernatural beings. In his work on man-gods, Serge Gruzinski observes that, through coalition with sacred beings, often present in holy relics, "something penetrated the man, possessed him, transformed him into a faithful replica of God" made him "part of the very authority he adored" (22-23). [Gruzinski \(1989\)](#) The impersonator adopts the perspective of a deity connected to the human world and perceives himself as the deity. For "body is not an abstract object with a fixed culturally human perspective, but a process comprising a series of transformations, each of which entails a transformation of perspectives" (30). [Turner \(1979\)](#) The impersonator maintains a permeable condition in which multiple views can appear and interact with one another. He transforms his vista by altering his physical body, interaction with participants and being possessed by the deity. He refashions his self to be in the exact condition for the deity to appear and play through his body. His self develops into a reflexive state through which profuse perspectives go back and forth. [Turner \(1979\)](#)

## 7. CONCLUSION

To sum up, *Theyyam* is a renowned social, cultural and religious ceremony of North Kerala. All castes and socioeconomic strata in the Hindu community participate in the *Theyyam* performance, which is still an active tradition. Each *Theyyam* ritual is given a name in honour of the deity or spirit that possess the performers and every *Theyyam* has a myth connected to its genesis and has ceremonies distinctive to their *Theyyam*. The myths and legends in their visual representation, produce emotions of holiness, ecstasy and sublimation in people heedless of their social strata. As the deity do not have a *Sthula Sarira* or the gross body, they need a medium to make themselves visible. The performer who traverses from mortal to the immortal requires strict and severe adherence to the indigenous traditions and rituals. It is he who creates a proper aura and expresses the slight and sophisticated emotions of the deity impersonated. Regardless of the verity in myth and legends, people admire those tales, honour their living Gods and its essence embolden their lives.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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