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PANDEMIC *THEYYAMS*: CAN TOURISM BE A LIFE SAVIOUR FOR THE ARTISTS?

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ABSTRACT

In a world that remains in the throes of the Covid era, we find ourselves adapting to a new "normal," where the virus transcends distinctions of caste, color, religion, class, and gender. However, the brunt of the pandemic has undeniably fallen harder on the marginalized segments of society. Globally, individuals have confronted Covid and explored diverse avenues to surmount its challenges. Even in regions like Kerala, the pandemic has unleashed unprecedented consequences, particularly affecting the realm of ritual performances. Throughout this pandemic period, traditional performances, which encompass both ritualistic and labor aspects, have been indefinitely put on hold. This article undertakes an examination of the current state and potential future trajectories of *Theyyam*, a ritualistic performing art intrinsic to North Malabar, against the backdrop of the Covid era. It attempts to offer a distinct perspective on the rituals, cultural expressions, and artistic performances of North Malabar across various historical periods. Moreover, it delves into the role played by the tourism sector in times of pandemic-like situations, and the role that social media has assumed in providing support to ritual performers and in the dissemination and popularization of the *Theyyam* tradition amid the pandemic's constraints.

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INTRODUCTION

In the Southern part of India, Kerala had successfully marketed its natural beauty in the tourism industry. "Based on the tourism policy documents of the central and state governments, the Kerala tourism model is acclaimed as one of the most liberalized tourism models with the private sector leading tourism development and the state acting as a facilitator rather than a regulator." (Archana 252) In the pre-pandemic times, according to the Kerala Tourist Statistics of 2019, there was a tourist influx from 1,096,407 to 1,189,771, and foreign exchange earnings rose from INR 8,764.46 crores to INR 10,271.06 crores when compared to the statistics of 2018. Additionally, domestic tourism increased from 15,604,661 to 18,384,233, resulting in a 24.14% revenue growth from the previous year. (18) Many factors, 'such as neo-liberalisation, new promotional strategies and improved travel connectivity, have been responsible for the rise and growth of tourism, both domestic and foreign, in the state' (Prakash and Alwin 324). Though it was evident that the number of tourists significantly declined during the pandemic, the industry is expecting a post-pandemic boom in the domestic and international sector at the wake of a pandemic-free state. Underscoring this, during the 'Question Hour Session', the Tourism Minister of Kerala, PA Muhammed Riyas, addressed this issue at the State Assembly: 'a growth of 2.63 per cent has been achieved in the tourism sector during the post-Covid period.' (2023). Interestingly, Kerala often showcased its culture and folk performances to boost the tourism industry.

Traditional folk-art forms, particularly *Theyyam* in North Malabar, have had the immense potential to attract tourist attention. Notably, during the pandemic, UNESCO referred to the condition of art as a "cultural emergency" and 'launched a global movement to mobilize the creative community in these times while finding solutions to empowering the artists and other professionals through policy changes and financial measures.' (Arora 2020) In Kerala too, measures were taken to foster Responsible Tourism (RT). RT is defined as 'an alternative approach evolved against the negative impacts of 'Mass Tourism' and it 'is mainly conceived with three kinds of responsibilities which are termed as the 'triple bottom line' – economic responsibility, social responsibility, and environmental responsibility.' (34) Though RT initiative was launched in Kerala by 2018 before the Pandemic on an experimental basis; it was 'a tool for poverty alleviation, strengthening women, conservation of local and heritage art, craft, traditional livelihood activities and local development by assuring the local community involvement in tourism activities.' (35). Certainly, the pandemic has negatively impacted ritual art in Kerala. This article suggests examining how Responsible Tourism can aid in reviving *Theyyam*. It also explores utilizing virtual tourism within Responsible Tourism to support *Theyyam* during the pandemic, along with leveraging social media to promote this ritual art worldwide.

Performers become God: *Theyyam*, a traditional ritual art performance in North Malabar, encompasses various elements such as

rituals, vocal and instrumental music, dance, painting, scripture, and literature. It vividly and dramatically portrays and venerates ancient heroes/heroines, ancestral spirits, serpents, and animal deities through *thottam*¹ rituals. These performances take place in natural spaces known as *kavus*², which are ecosystems centered around local shrines. To partake in *Theyyam*, performers must undergo a rigorous penance that includes adhering to strict pollution rites³ and refraining from leaving the ritual premises⁴. Any violation of these observances is considered taboo, and performers may be barred from further participation. For the artists, the period of penance is when they undergo the process of deification or apotheosis. At the performance site, 'devotees are wholly absorbed in the presence of the deity, perceiving only the divine performance before them, rather than the individual dancer.' (Namboothiri, 2015, 3) During the performance, devotees approach the deity, seeking a sensory experience of the divine and a profound connection. The deity blesses everyone with kind words, provides solutions to their problems, and shares anecdotes that alleviate the devotees' suffering.

Theyyam: An Art in its Evolution: Many historians have documented the evolution of *Theyyam* from a ritual-to-ritual art. According to Rajesh Komath, 'the cult has undergone a shift of thrust from devotion to performing art, from worship to an object of aesthetics and gratification, hence a commodity over a period of time.' (2013, 2) However colonial writings on *Theyyam* have dehumanized it as the 'devil's dance.' (Namboothiri 2015, 3) We can read this as deliberate and dismissive with an imperialistic intent to call a region's indigenous culture primitive and uncivilized. The administration wanted to dismantle and dilute an area's collective cultural resistance against them. Gilles Tarabout elaborates the Christian Missionary and the colonial attitude towards the native ritual art like *Theyyam* by quoting V. William, a student of the United Theological College, Bangalore. William describes *Theyyam*

There is no art or anything of cultural value in this cult appealing to the modern mind. The practices adopted in this cultus are hideous, monstrous, demonic and frightful when compared to the Bhakti cult of popular religion. Fear dominates in this cult and there is no place for love or personal devotion. Psychologically it does more harm than good to the worshippers. [...] (qtd. in Tarabout 2005, 189).

In his comparison between *Theyyam* and the rituals of the Bhakti tradition rooted in Sanskritized Hinduism, William attempts to justify colonialism and its treatment of native culture as primitive and uncivilized. This argument reflects colonial missionary sentiments, and unfortunately, many 'progressive' writers, political leaders, and cultural figures from Kerala have echoed these sentiments, regarding *Theyyam* as primitive, superstitious, and in need of reform or at the worst, eradication. It is important to note the Brahmanical aversion to subaltern ritualistic practices and animal sacrifices, as well as their unquestioning adherence to colonial notions of modernity for the purpose of social reformation, were reflected in a denigration and aversion to *Theyyam*. DinesanVadakkiniyil further elaborates on this tendency, '*Theyyam* played a crucial role in creating a social system that hindered the publicity of Christianity. To destroy society's belief, they need to consider *Theyyam* as the devil, not a goddess. Moreover, they need to frame this belief system as superstition that evolved from ignorance.' (2014, 22) A strong belief rooted in the minds of people about their culture and worship through *Theyyam* was also misread as a superstition by reformers within Kerala. Sreenarayana Guru, a social reformer who worked to exterminate superstitions and exploitations based on caste in society, reinforced the colonialist preaching by considering *Theyyam* worship as 'devil's worship that has to be eliminated.' (Vadakkiniyil 2014, 24).

The first elected Communist government in Kerala, under E.M.S. Namboothiripadu's leadership, played a significant role in supporting *Theyyam* and other subaltern rituals. The government brought about reforms in education, agriculture, and land, aiming to eliminate superstitions from society. Initially, left-liberals considered *Theyyam* regressive, but the leftists recognized the importance of preserving native culture and diverse beliefs. They sought to extract *Theyyam* as

an art form resisting caste and feudal hierarchy. The left movements have provided an artistic framework for *Theyyam*. Tarabout highlights the impasse experienced by Marxists regarding *Theyyam*. He said, On the one hand, entrenched as it was in the rural structures of power, *Teyyam* was condemned for legitimizing the existing land tenancy relationships, and therefore for perpetuating a local 'feudal' order. On the other hand, it was possible to see the stories of past heroes which were at the centre of many *Teyyams* as epics of resistance against such an exploitative order, and *Teyyam* costumes, music, songs and dance as the expression of the creativity of the masses (2005, 194). Marxist practitioners aimed to showcase *Theyyam* as a public performance, emphasizing its artistic elements such as performance aesthetics, body makeup, costumes, theatre elements, dance, and song. These aspects were presented by artists outside the traditional *Theyyam* performing communities, transcending caste boundaries. Anthropologist Wayne Ashley, renowned for his extensive work on *Theyyam*, elaborates on the dilemma faced by Marxists in this context:



Figure 1. A photograph of Digital Hundi at Padamanabhaswami temple, Trivandrum. Photo by Sreekavya M.K

They feel that destroying the belief system and social relations which support the conditions for teyyam will put numerous performing families out of work. In their scenario for the future of teyyam its existence will be ensured within an emerging wage labour system. Money will replace birthright, privilege and obligation. *Teyyam* will no longer function solely as offering but will take another cultural path [...]. The stage will dominate over the shrine. (qtd. in Tarabout 2005, 195). Left-wing ideologists have harnessed regional myths as tools for social reform against caste and gender injustices. *Theyyam*, performed for both locals and tourists, has transitioned from a participatory ritual to a cultural commodity integrated into the market economy. Its art features and ritual qualities have become commodities sold in the cultural market, granting authority to performers.

Theyyam and Popular Culture: Global tourism has provided opportunities for *Theyyam* performers to showcase their art in foreign countries, sometimes with minimal ritual practices. However, performing *Theyyam* outside its ritual space has drawn criticism. The popularity of the Kannada film *Kanthara*⁸ (2022), Directed by Rishab Shetty, among Keralites, further propelled *Theyyam* performances in various parts of Kerala, often by artists with limited knowledge of *Theyyam*. An example is the performance of *Theyyam* during the Pongala festival at the Attukal temple in Trivandrum on March 3, 2023, by Kalasamithees (art groups) like Attingal Kalavedi and Kozhikode Theyyatta Kala Samithi. In interviews, performers expressed their desire to be recognized as *kolakkaran* (*Theyyam* performer) rather than *Theyyam* artists, distancing themselves from the ritual practices. The Hindu online on 3rd March 2023 referred the *Theyyam* performance in Attukal as a dance that 'was staged for the

first time in Trivandrum in all its original and grand format'. The question at hand is whether a *Theyyam* can be considered complete if performed outside of its natural ritual premises. According to Vineesh K.N., *Theyyam* is deeply intertwined with various communities that carry out specific customs and rituals crucial to its structure. Each community plays a distinct role and holds unique power within the performance, such as carpenters cutting *naalmaram* (sacred posts) and blacksmiths polishing weapons. The involvement of different communities in these ritual actions contributes to the complexity and uniqueness of *Theyyam*. This intricate nature makes it challenging to replicate the performance accurately outside the Malabar region.

Moreover, *Theyyam's* *uriyattu* (oracular performance) is deeply rooted in the stories of regional goddesses and cultural histories, which cannot be fully conveyed beyond the specific territories of each sacred grove (*kavu*). Therefore, any performances witnessed by audiences with limited knowledge of the ritual, outside of its natural premises, are mere imitations lacking the essence of the original ritual. (2023, 25-26). Kannaperuvannan, a veteran in the field of *Theyyam* performance, made it clear for all by saying that the ritual aspects would be absent in the outside⁹ performances of *Theyyam* (Vadakkiniyil 2014, 29). The emerging tourist trends like responsible tourism and the popularity of social media have brought together the artistic and ritual aspects of *Theyyam*, allowing the global audience to experience it authentically in its natural settings.

Covid and *Theyyam*: The traditional *Theyyam* season typically follows the southwest monsoon, spanning from June to August. Between October and May, a notable surge in foreign tourists visiting districts like Kannur and Kasaragod to witness *Theyyam* is evident in the 2019 Month Wise Statistics of Foreign Tourists (65). Nevertheless, the pandemic disrupted these seasonal performances due to lockdowns, severely affecting the earnings of performers and ritual practitioners who heavily depended on their income from these events. Although specific data about the occupations of *Theyyam* performers outside of their performances is lacking, it has been observed that many engaged in alternative work such as masonry and unskilled labor. For many *Theyyam* performers, the pandemic disrupted their sole source of income and social role as embodiments of goddesses in society. Raman Peruvannan, a performer, expressed: We couldn't perform *Theyyam* due to the pandemic. It usually involves a large audience, and performing without one feels wrong. We often rely on minimal earnings from offerings, making it a vital livelihood. Performing without income becomes untenable. (Personal communication, March 04, 2021). It's essential to note that performers often choose professions that enable them to fully commit to *Theyyam*. This underscores the importance of Responsible Tourism in supporting performers and their distinctive cultural traditions throughout the year, not just during the *Theyyam* season.

***Theyyam* and the Virtual Platforms:** Though many *Theyyam* artists were initially perplexed at lockdowns, many come up with new ideas of utilizing technologies to their advantage. There were new initiatives from different sources to support the artists who were in trouble during the pandemic times. For example, 'The Internet has brought to the forefront unique opportunities for artists and institutions to interact with each other in a varied manner, forging collaborations and creating newer outlets for the arts', says Smriti Rajgarhia, Director, Serendipity Arts Foundation and Festival. (qtd. in Acharekar 2021) During the pandemic, Kerala Lalithakala Akademi offered assistance to artists with no income, including painters, sculptors, photographers and cartoonists, through programmes like 'Nirakeralam' and 'Shilpa Keralam'. The artists could work from home,' says Nemom Pushparaj, Chairman of the Akademi.' (qtd in Thomas 2021) At the same time, a *WhatsApp* group named "Theyyakaazhchakal Charity" was formed in March 2019 for *Theyyam* artists. The group has so far offered financial assistance to 25 *Theyyam* artists. (Praveen 2020) Furthermore, dedicated social media pages like Manayola and Manjalkkuri have played a crucial role in supporting both the performers and the ritual during these challenging times. They initiated fundraising efforts that not only provided financial aid but also formed social networks, offering

performers a sense of security and belonging amid the uncertainties of the pandemic. In his article titled "Between Local and Global *Theyyam* Goes Cyber and Beyond," Giorgio De Martino looks at the influence of new media in ritual performances like *Theyyam*. Martino observes, "New media and new technology will radically change our local/global perception of this performance". (32) Initiatives like e-puja and online *prasadam* reflect the emergence of a techno-temple culture. The growing virtual audience has the potential to amplify both domestic and international viewership. Responsible Tourism can integrate these virtual platforms with offline ones, a shift that many artists have embraced to sustain their art and livelihoods during the pandemic. To address the challenges faced by *Theyyam* performers, the tourism department can establish a dedicated page for *Theyyam* on the district tourism website, complete with an interactive grievance cell. During interviews, some performers expressed resistance to the digital realm, emphasizing that the emotional connection and solace derived from sharing their experiences with the deity during live performances cannot be replicated virtually (Ratheesh Panikkar, Personal Communication, December 19, 2022).

However, others believed that widespread adoption of online streaming and digital payments at every *Theyyam* performing centre (as depicted in Fig. 1) could offer them a stable income. Additionally, an online market (*chantha*)¹ can be set up on the festival website for purchasing *Theyyam* artist-crafted artefacts. These hybrid possibilities offer economic and creative support to the artists. Moreover, technological advancements in traditional rituals like *Theyyam* bring about a new artistic norm. Virtual performances will need to adhere to evolving rules on online platforms, with the tourism department coordinating. However, effectively live-streaming *Theyyam* digitally remains a challenge, as replicating the spiritual and aesthetic experience of the ritual site is complex. The final section of the paper explores the potential benefits of tourism in handling precarious situations like the pandemic. The Responsible Tourism initiatives brought 'focussed attention on the local communities at the destination, making tourism more inclusive.' (Qtd in Prakash and Alwin 325) The Covid lockdown brought Proximity Tourism or the Domestic Tourism into focus as it 'highlighted the value of local leisure possibilities and domestic touring.' (Desbiolles 3093). 'The ratio of arrivals of domestic tourists in Kerala in 2021 (124.62) is eight times that in the pre-pandemic year (15.45). The surge of domestic tourism over foreign tourism points to the changing trend in tourist behaviour to choose a closer destination in times of crisis.' (Prakash and Alwin 327). As part of this changing trend what tourism department can do to enhance the lives of the artists:

- The effective implementation of Responsible Tourism policies can create jobs and a database of the performers. Performers could become cultural guides through skill development programmes and vocational training, ensuring self-reliance during crises.
- Additionally, it can foster collaborations between *Theyyam* performers and other cultural organizations or artists, both locally and internationally, to promote cultural exchange and provide additional performance opportunities.
- Moreover, the department can think of conducting programs to address the mental health and well-being of *Theyyam* performers, including access to counselling services and support networks.

To sustain performers' livelihoods during a pandemic, a hybrid approach proves effective by blending physical *Theyyam* performances in *kavus* with online streaming. This approach enables adaptations like mask-wearing, social distancing, and digital transactions, which persist post-pandemic. In the current scenario, the state could consider launching a dedicated virtual tourism platform for global and local enthusiasts. Remarkably, many rituals have resumed with active participation, even incorporating mask-wearing. Recent *Theyyam* festivals, with both positive and negative feedback from Keralites worldwide, highlight this adaptability. Despite the

¹Official Website of Sargalaya: <https://sargaalaya.in/>.

pandemic's harsh impact, it has spurred ritual hybridization and reinvention across cultural settings in Kerala.

Key Points:

- The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted traditional ritual art in Kerala, particularly *Theyyam*, disrupting the usual performance season and affecting the livelihoods of performers. However, the initiatives like online platforms, social media, and virtual performances have been explored to support and sustain their art.
- Responsible Tourism is suggested as a means to revive *Theyyam*, exploring virtual tourism and leveraging social media to support and promote this ritual art worldwide during the pandemic. It proposed to create jobs, provide cultural exchange opportunities, and address the mental health of *Theyyam* performers, ensuring their self-reliance and well-being during crises.
- The article posits that a hybridization of ritual practices, incorporating both online and offline elements holds the potential to alleviate the financial hardships faced by performers grappling with income loss during the pandemic.

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