



19:2 April 2025

Published on 14, April-2025

ISSN: 3049-2688 (Online)

To what extent is public folklore authentic? An Evaluation of Theyyam Enactments

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Abstract

With an emphasis on the public performance and dissemination of theyyam in North Malabar, Kerala, this paper explores the complex concept of authenticity in folklore in the context of a world that is changing quickly. This study seeks to understand the essence of authenticity by investigating the processes that go into making theyyam public and analyzing the impact of public dissemination on the private and traditional aspects of folklore. In addition to identifying and assessing the best practices for creating genuine and captivating public folklore, qualitative research techniques like ethnographic studies, interviews, and content analysis are employed to investigate the intricate dynamics of making theyyam public. The findings of this study will provide valuable insights into practical steps for cultural preservation and aid in our understanding of how folklore is maintained, shared, and altered in communities.

Keywords: *Theyyam, Folklore, public folklore, authenticity, cultural heritage.*

INTRODUCTION

Groups use folklore to reaffirm their identity and principles. The rituals, symbols, stories, etc. instill morals and cultural knowledge. Throughout time, folklore endures but also changes; it "remains wholly within the control of its practitioners" to be remembered, altered, or forgotten. The field of folklore is governed by folklore practitioners, or the community members who actively participate in its creation, conservation, and adaptation. Folklore's adaptability allows it to continue developing as a living, breathing embodiment of the values, identities, and experiences of the communities that produce and maintain it. (New World Encyclopaedia, Folklore).

In the fast-paced world we live in today, the importance of authenticity in public folklore is immense. Authenticity is essential for maintaining the true nature and integrity of folklore traditions, guaranteeing that they are faithfully conveyed and preserved for future generations

(Urdea). Although the idea of authenticity has changed over time and can be understood in different ways, it continues to be a key focus in the study of folklore (Kõmmus).

The portrayal and reconstruction of folklore in new forms and settings both inside and outside of the communities where it originated is known as the public sphere of folklore. The public domain of folklore is not merely a passive replication of traditional forms, but rather a dynamic process of adaptation and change. As folklore encounters new audiences, cultures, and social realities in unfamiliar settings, it gets reinterpreted and altered (Baron and Spitzer).

The degree to which traditional cultural activities are performed and spread in a way that faithfully captures their original form and cultural context is referred to as authenticity in public folklore. The study and preservation of folklore within a broader social framework is referred to as public folklore. It acknowledges that folklore is a public and shared cultural legacy that is not limited to traditional societies. Authenticity is essential to defining and appreciating the significance of these cultural manifestations in the context of popular folklore.

Theyyam is a long-standing ritualistic form of worship that dates back to prehistoric cultures that predate Hinduism in the area. Extensive and colorful enactments with dance, music, colorful costumes, and complex rituals define this ceremonial performance. In the communities where it is practiced, it has great cultural, social, and spiritual significance. In addition to being religious rites, Theyyam ceremonies are used for storytelling, community building, and the preservation of regional customs and ancestry ("History of Theyyam"). With an emphasis on the public performance and spread of theyyam in North Malabar, Kerala, this study explores the complex concept of authenticity in folklore in the context of a rapidly changing world.

Background of the Study

Theodor H. Gaster, a renowned semiticist,

claims Folklore is that aspect of a people's culture that is either consciously or unconsciously preserved in beliefs and practices, customs, and observances of general currency in myths, legends, and stories of widespread acceptance, as well as in arts and crafts that convey the spirit and brilliance of a collective rather than an individual. Folklore serves as a constant source and frame of reference for more formal literature and art because it is a repository of popular traditions, an integral part of popular traditions, and an integral part of the popular climate. However, it differs from this in that it is fundamentally of the people, by the people, and for the people ("Definitions of Folklore").

Folklore serves as a living storehouse of cultural customs, encompassing a variety of elements crucial to the identity of a community or group. Folklore is a significant component of cultural inheritance and is rooted in the lives and expressions of common people, in contrast to more structured forms of art and literature.

Folklore is a live cultural expression that encompasses a vast array of myths, customs, practices, and creative expressions that have been passed down through the generations. Folklore contains the core of a community's identity, history, and values. However, the modern era-which is marked by globalization, digital communication, and increased cross-cultural interaction-has seen significant changes in the dynamics of folklore distribution and preservation. One major issue that arises in this evolving environment is authenticity in folklore.

Authenticity is the degree to which a certain folklore aspect, like a story, song, dance, or ritual, stays true to its traditional and cultural roots. This illustrates the idea that folklore should faithfully represent the ideals, traditions, and cultural heritage of the society from which it originates. As more people enter the public sphere through events, performances, digital media, and even commercial endeavors, questions regarding the validity of folklore gain importance. What impact does the spread of folklore have on authenticity? Folklore either loses its original meaning or chang-

es to reflect societal shifts when it is disseminated to a wider audience.

Theyyam are revered as gods by the people of North Malabar. The districts of Kannur and Kasaragod in North Malabar are where the theyyam ceremonies are mostly performed. There are about 400 Theyyam in Kerala. They all had myths. Thottam pattu is used to present each Theyyam myth. Before the theyyam was tied, the thottam was sung.

Theyyam are viewed by the residents of North Malabar as gods who are immortal. The districts of Kannur and Kasaragod in North Malabar are where the theyyam ceremonies are mainly performed. There are about four hundred Theyyam in Kerala. They all had mythology. Thottam pattu is used to present every Theyyam myth. Prior to the theyyam being tied, the thottam was sung.

This study attempts to investigate the dynamics of making theyyam public, including the roles of communities, folklorists, and other stakeholders, by looking at the processes involved in making theyyam public and analyzing the effects of public dissemination on the traditional and private components of folklore. Additionally, it identifies and assesses the best techniques for creating genuine and engaging public folklore.

Because it advances our knowledge of the concept of authenticity in the context of folklore, this study has substantial academic significance. It clarifies the intricate operational aspects of public folklore and provides helpful information on concrete steps for cultural preservation. The study of theyyam enactments is an important endeavor that can further our understanding of folklore, public performance, and the human condition. It is a complex subject with numerous angles that need further research and thought.

Using qualitative research techniques like content analysis and interviews, this study aims to discover the essence of authenticity in folklore within the framework of a rapidly changing world.

Authenticity and Folklore

"Authentic" is derived from the Greek word "authentēs," which means "one who acts with authority" and "made by one's own hand." Lionel Trilling's recollection of "the violent meanings which are explicit in the Greek ancestry of the word" deepens the definition and contrasts it with the term's marketing in a Western-driven market: Authentēs: total control; also, murder. Authentēs was a killer and even a suicide, in addition to being a master and a doer (Bendix). The concept of authenticity is further complicated by Lionel Trilling's interpretation of what "authentēs" means. Trilling notes that the term "authentēs" has an aggressive connotation due to its Greek origins. "Authentēs" can mean "to control completely," implying an unhelpful kind of power or authority. It can also mean "to murder," which is a stark contrast to the positive associations with authenticity that are currently prevalent.

The concept of authenticity in folklore has evolved over time as a result of a number of factors, such as cultural shifts, advancements in technology, and evolving viewpoints within the field of folklore studies. Historians and collectors created the idea of "authentic folklore" in the 18th century while searching for old tales, songs, and customs to document and preserve (Bendix). This early idea of authenticity focused on the uniqueness and purity of folklore, which is often associated with rural or pre-industrial cultures. As folklore studies developed as an academic discipline, the concept of authenticity became more complex. AA. Jaarsma and other researchers in Friesland, Netherlands, began to question how the collector shaped and interpreted the stories they were gathering (Venbrux and Meder).

A romanticized view of rural life and a wish to preserve what were thought to be vanishing customs were reflected in the early folklore studies' emphasis on originality and purity. However, this idea of authenticity has evolved over time. Today's folklorists recognize that folklore is dynamic and always evolving, influenced by both internal and external factors. They emphasize that authenticity should not only be associated with historical continuity or

resistance to change, but also with how folk traditions adapt and develop within their cultural surroundings. A fuller understanding of the variety and vibrancy of folklore in various groups, both rural and urban, is made possible by this more accepting perspective.

Since it suggests that the issue has been detected and that this discovery puts into doubt authenticity, the term "authentic" appears to be problematic. (Meder and Venbrux) Throughout the 20th century, cultural theorists, art dealers, music critics, and tour operators were all involved in authenticity disputes. Folklore studies examined the need for authenticity as well as how it was produced and given disciplinary validity, especially in Germany and the US. The concept of authenticity continues to be a challenge for contemporary folklore studies. Scholars now recognize folklore as a dynamic and constantly changing cultural expression influenced by a number of factors, such as globalization, migration, and technology.

Finding a "authentic" representation of folklore is no longer as important as understanding the processes of production, transmission, and adaptation that characterize folk traditions in the modern day.

In folklore, authenticity plays a critical role in balancing "conservatism and dynamism," or continuity and change (Bendix). People feel more a part of their culture and ancestry when folklore is authentic. Traditional folklore embodies the beliefs, values, customs, and oral history of a particular community or group. It serves as a repository for their experiences and knowledge, helping to define their identity as a people.

Impact of digital technology on authenticity of folklore

Digital technology have had a major impact on folklore's authenticity. Folklorist Trevor J. Blank claims that online folklore is equally authentic as its face-to-face counterpart (Understanding Folk Culture in the Digital Age: An Interview with Folklorist Trevor J. Blank, Pt. 1 | The Signal). According to folk-

lorist Alan Dundes, despite some people's worries that technology is eliminating folklore, it is really becoming a crucial part of its transmission (Bacon).

Economic Impact

The commodification of folklore has the potential to increase its economic value through the exchange of cultural assets on the global market. Additionally, it can provide source communities with the funds necessary to preserve their culture, enabling traditional craftspeople to carry on producing their wares. Traditional meanings may be distorted by the compromises made to meet consumer expectations, jeopardizing their long-term survival (Pager).

Intellectual property rights

Discussions about the need to limit the negative effects of commodification on traditional/indigenous populations and the underlying source traditions have given rise to proposals to pass legislation protecting intangible property rights in traditional cultural expressions (TCE) and folklore (Folklore and Commercialization). Some argue that if folklore is revived, it might become commercialized because it is generally thought to contain rejected and uncanonized knowledge. Furthermore, there are ongoing local and international initiatives to safeguard traditional knowledge and cultural expressions, including folklore, on a sui generis basis (Intellectual Property and Traditional Cultural Expressions/Folklore).

Public folklore

Activities such as fieldwork, interpretation, or programming that present folklore and folklife to the public with the related goals of entertainment and education are what generate public folklore. Folklore is transformed into public folklore by folklorists. (Spitzer and Baron). Public folklore embodies a dynamic approach through programming that highlights folklore as a living legacy and portrays typical performance scenarios. The transformation of folklore into public folklore requires the presenta-

tion and application of folk traditions in new contexts and forms both inside and outside of the communities in which they originated (Muthukumaraswamy and Kaushal).

The primary goals of this field of study and practice are the documentation, preservation, and promotion of traditional and folk cultural expressions within a community or culture. It involves analyzing various groups of people's beliefs, customs, traditions, and artistic expressions, usually with an emphasis on the cultural heritage of marginalized or underrepresented cultures.

Process of making public folklore

- One of the first steps in making folklore accessible to the broader public is gathering and recording folk customs, stories, ceremonies, music, art, and other expressions. Folklorists, ethnographers, and community members can collect this data through written records, fieldwork, interviews, and recordings.
- To ensure their survival, folklore items are often conserved and archived. This could mean digitizing content for online access and building physical archives in libraries or museums. Folklore is conserved for the benefit of future generations.
- Educational programs aimed at improving knowledge and understanding of traditional cultural practices are often included in public folklore. This category includes seminars, workshops, storytelling sessions, and school initiatives that inspire individuals to learn about and engage in folk customs.
- Folklore is disseminated to the local communities where it originated. Community involvement is crucial to ensuring accurate representation and respect for cultural practices. Additionally, collaboration makes it possible for the process to be sensitive to cultural differences and community requirements.
- It is necessary to interpret and contextualize folklore for different audiences in order to make it accessible to the broader public. Folklorists and curators may offer historical, cultural, and social context to help the general public understand the significance and mean-

ing of the folklore. ((*Folklorists | About Folk-life & Traditional Arts | New Hampshire Folk-life*)

Theyyam as ritual

Malabar, the northern part of Kerala, has a different culture than the rest of the state. There are further distinctions between South Malabar and North Malabar, which comprises the districts of Kasaragod and Kannur. This difference is reflected in the people's habits, rituals, and way of life. Theyyam is a custom. According to Payyanāṭ and Prakash, the transcendental concept that underlies theyyam and the social environment that fosters and sustains it are exclusive to North Malabar.

Theyyam performers are the focus of communities like Vannan, Malayan, Mavilan, Velan, Munnoottan, Anjunnoottan, Pulayar, Kopalar, and others. Each performer portrays a strong hero, wearing ostentatious attire and applying copious amounts of makeup. The wonderfully magnificent headgear and jewelry inspire awe and admiration. The ceremonial dance, which is accompanied by a choir of musical instruments, might be thought of as a possession trance that entails alterations to the body, identity, and consciousness. In the context of ritual, "possession trance includes the shared belief that such changes result from the actor's body and person being taken over by another entity—a spirit, an ancestor, another living person, or even an animal." According to Bourguignon (2004) (V.R. and Sheeja), "the actor's self is in abeyance and the behavior presented is that of the other, so that major transformations are accepted."

The theyyam performance is preceded by a number of rites. After receiving an indication, the artist (Kolakaran) is informed and the performance date is confirmed. Theyyam requires three, five, or seven days of fasting. The performer must remain at home throughout this period and is not allowed to consume any non-vegetarian cuisine. The first part of the Theyyam performance is called Vellattam or Thottam. The Kolakaran appears on stage clothed correctly after the ritual song (thottam) is finished. The colors used to pro-

duce face makeup come from natural sources including Chayilyam, Karimazhi, Aripodi, and Maniyola, and they come in a variety of patterns. Their clothing, accessories, and facial makeup will differ depending on the style of theyyam.

An integral component of the Theyyam rite is the Thottam songs. They enable the performer to achieve a psychological state of affinity with the god and tell the story of the deity who is being propitiated in this ceremonial performance. In order to get the precise mood and essential spirit of the persona he is supposed to represent, the performer himself sings the thottam songs. The performance is religious because the musical instruments are performed in rhythm with the performer's moves. The performances create a potent aesthetic environment and mood for the audience, which instantly makes them feel happy and allays their personal and collective fears. (V.R. and Sheeja). The musicians play a ritual song that tells the story of how the shrine's deity came to be venerated, accompanied by traditional instruments. The dancer's ceremonial entrance inside the temple, complete with elaborate costumes and makeup, comes after a brief pause. After that, he takes a seat in front of the shrine, dons the headdress—the most respected component of the ensemble—and gradually changes into the specific deity of the shrine. Throughout the temple and courtyard, the theyyam dances and performs. In addition, the dancer distributes rice and turmeric powder to the audience as a blessing. People think he's divine as long as the hat is on. The true power of theyyam comes from employing traditional clothing, headgear, and face paints created of plant-based pigments to summon famous goddesses like Bhagavathi, warriors like Vishnumoorthi, and ancestral spirits. Singing thottam pattu and playing traditional percussion instruments like the chenda, kuzhal, and elathalam create an exuberant and captivating ambiance.

The basic ritual structure of purification processes is unchanged, taking on a celestial quality and bestowing blessings on believers. Reinterpretations that preserve their relevance

for both insiders and outsiders while adapting to new social circumstances include staging areas, props, and modified narratives.

Theyyam performance in public sphere

Theyyam is a very private art form when performed in its real cultural context. But instead of being a part of the ritual, the same theyyam is displayed as an exhibition; this is known as a public performance in the context of movies, commercials, or other cultural events. Public folklore is the term used to describe folklore presented in this manner. There will be no mythology, religion, worship, etc. here.

Popular theyyam are also produced at this level, in contrast to the formally mediated theyyam performed in such formal venues. Political parties, youth and student unions, service organizations, trade unions, and cultural organizations are some of the groups involved in this act of projecting themselves into the public consciousness. They frequently use billboards with sporadic parades of Theyyam icons, posters, leaflets, and banners. The visual appeal of movies and music videos is improved by the usage of stuffed and live theyyam.

Theyyam gained popularity among the general public when their singers were asked to play it in the nation's capital on official, festive occasions like Independence and Republic days (Dasan). Cultural festivals and the Asiad, two significant international gatherings that signaled the auspicious start of theyyam performances, were hosted at the national headquarters. In these decontextualized performances, the performer loses control over their own cultural representations. Space, time, sequence, and duration are all controlled outside. As a result, a community-specific rite turns into an item whose spectacular display solely satisfies the voyeuristic gaze of the country's elite.

When theyyam is performed in kavu, it is a ritual; a public theyyam performance is devoid of all life, faith, myth, and sacredness. It simply becomes a manifestation of theyyam. Theyyam often fails to capture the essence of the

art form when performed in Kerala processions, cultural events, and advertising campaigns. These kinds of public performances are strongly opposed.

The majority of theyyam in North Malabar become entangled with kavu after weeks of fasting and preparation, gaining dominion over a whole region. Framing it as a performance and giving the audience a performance-style warning can help address authenticity problems relating to the larger theme. From Theyyam's time to the present, many things have changed. Communities are embracing mythology that transcends their own issues, and kavu transforms into temples using tools, facial writing, clothing, and other materials utilized in theyyam. Both globalization and brahmanization have contributed to these changes, and it is the performers' responsibility to inform the public about the distinctions between public theyyam performances and the customs of North Malabar.

Findings and analysis

Originally dedicated to gods, regional deities, and ancestor spirits, theyyam is a ceremonial worship practice. In Northern Kerala, it plays a crucial role in the devotions and belief systems of local people. The performer—usually a member of a lower caste—becomes the deity or spirit being called upon during the ceremony, which involves a close interaction with the divine. The rites, which include prayers, offerings, and trance-like performances, are believed to facilitate direct communication between the human and divine realms. The theyyam ceremony is actively participated in and supported by the local community. Asking for favors, guidance, or solutions to their problems is a common way for people to interact with the performer who portrays the deity.

During festivals and other occasions, theyyam are typically performed in public as a kind of cultural entertainment, primarily for tourists. The performances are held to showcase Kerala's rich cultural heritage and robust creative traditions. The performances in public areas are largely intended to amuse the audience. They are created and performed in a style that

attracts spectators with colorful costumes, elaborate makeup, and energetic dancing techniques. Without necessarily engaging in the more deeply ritualistic or spiritual aspects, viewers can still appreciate the creative features. Theyyam's main objectives in public performances are entertainment and cultural preservation, although its original ritualistic structure served religious and spiritual purposes. In the traditional ritual, community members actively participate and work toward a spiritual connection, whereas in public presentations, the audience watches and takes in the spectacle. The spiritual and religious significance is far deeper in the original ritualistic setting, when the performance is vital to the community's religious practices and beliefs. Even while both situations involve ornate costumes and makeup, the ritualistic theyyam often has some symbolic elements and nuances that have religious significance apart from those employed in public performances.

Conclusion

Due to the growing interconnectedness of cultures in the era of globalization, various folklore aspects are being borrowed and blended. This interchange raises questions about the preservation of genuine traditions even though it can be enriching. There is an increasing need to make sure that folklore's cultural relevance and essence are preserved as it becomes more widely available. When sharing folklore online, it is important to keep in mind its cultural settings, origins, and meanings.

Furthermore, the commercialization of folklore has emerged as a major problem. Folklore runs the risk of losing its authenticity for financial gain in a time when it is easily marketed and commodified. This may result in the exploitation of cultural customs and the production of fake representations for mass consumption. The integrity of folklore must be valued and respected in order to overcome these issues. In order to preserve and promote genuine folklore, cooperation between communities, academics, and digital platforms can be extremely important. We can make sure that folklore survives while retaining its cul-

tural authenticity by having polite conversations, getting informed consent, and giving due credit.

The transition of theyyam from private village rites to public spectacles in urban settings sparked issues about authenticity. Some argue that its fundamental characteristics are preserved by upholding traditional aesthetics and ceremonial organization. Others use different locations, explanations, and aesthetics to highlight its renewal.

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