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Theyyam in the Digital Age: Spectacle, Participatory Culture, and the Transformation of Ritual

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Abstract

Theyyam, a ritualistic folk art form from Kerala, combines dance, music, and mime to honor local deities, spirits, and ancestral figures. Though deeply rooted in tradition, it has been reshaped by globalization and digital media, extending its reach beyond its original sacred spaces. The folk ritual is no longer confined to temple courtyards, Theyyam now thrives in digital spaces, where platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram foster new forms of participatory culture. This study examines how digital audiences engage with Theyyam by analyzing YouTube comments, revealing how folklore is not only preserved but also reinterpreted and circulated in online spaces. The internet serves not just as a medium for folk expression but as a dynamic site where traditions are debated, reshaped, and contested.

Introduction

The study of folklore originated in 19th-century Europe, with British antiquarian William John Thoms coining the term “folklore” in 1846. Before this, scholars referred to folklore materials as “popular antiquities” or “popular literature” (Bronner 5). Folklore embodies the way of life and the traditions of a particular group in a region. According to Alan Dundes, the term “folk” can refer to any group of people who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is whether it is a common occupation, language, or religion but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own (Dundes 34). Kerala is the land of folkloric art forms such as Padayani, Theyyatam, Kanyar Kali, Mudi yettu, Malavayiyattam, Kothamooriyattam, Nira, Puthari and Theyyam.

Theyyam is one of the oldest and most popular folk art forms in Kerala. Theyyam is a dance oriented ritualistic folk-art form for the worship of local deities, spirits, heroes, and goddesses in Kerala. The ritual involves dance, music, and mime. The ritual begins with the *thottam* which are songs sung by the drummers (Sundar and Sarma 39). In addition to this, there is also face painting, body painting, costume, kettledrums, bonfires, and lamps which are part of the ritual.

Scholars such as K.K.N Kurup, and S. Settar opine that the origin of Theyyam can be traced back to the hero worship in Sangam Era (300 B.C.-250 A.D.) (Kurup 5). In this tradition, artists are not merely performers but representatives of God themselves. Traditionally, these performers were male and belonged to marginalised castes while the audience consisted of Brahmins. There are more than 450 variations of Theyyam which are performed in North Malabar and Kannur regions in Kerala. Some of most famous *Theyyams* are Pottan Theyyam, Gulikan, Vishnumoorthi Theyyam, Rakhtachamundi theyyam, Muchilot Bhagavathi and Sree Muthappan .Theyyam are performed in sacred groves or *kavus* as well in the

courtyard of their patrons. These intermedial representations construct the social epistemology i.e., performers belonging to marginalized castes were expected to do their roles and duties as per the caste hierarchy as they receive patronage from their patrons. Theyyam as an art form has been looked at from various vantage points; sociology, anthropology, history, performance studies, cultural studies, folklore, and diaspora. Theyyam as a folklore is of socio-cultural importance to not just the people of Kerala but those outside Kerala including diasporic Malayalees and non-natives in general.

Social epistemology of the folk ritual

Folklore also serves as the vehicle of protest. Theyyam is a prime example of this statement. It captures the voice of the voiceless in the society. The performers belong to marginalized castes in Kerala such as Vannan, Malayan, Velan, Anjootan, Munuattan, Kopalan, Pulayan, Mavilan, and Vettuvan. The caste lines get blurred during the performances. The performers enjoy social mobility during the performance as the Nairs, Namboothiris etc dance with them and seek their blessings but only till the time, they are wearing the make-up and costume. As soon as the performance ends, the caste boundaries are reinstated. Some scholars point out that the figure of theyyam performer acts as a social counselor which helps in the healing and catharsis of intergenerational trauma over the years by the dominant caste groups (Ahammed 99). Certain theyyams consist of stories of caste transgressions and defiance by members of the marginalized caste.

Pottan theyyam is one such type of theyyam which depicts stories about members of marginalized communities defying caste norms. One such famous story features Shree Shankaracharya and a *Chandalan*. According to legend, Adi Shankaracharya, the great proponent of Advaita Vedanta, was once tested by Lord Shiva, who appeared before him in the guise of a Chandalan (an untouchable) along with Goddess Parvati and Nandikeshan. As Shankaracharya, trained in Vedic and Brahminical traditions, encountered them on the road, he instinctively commanded them to step aside, reflecting the caste-based prejudices of his time. However, Shiva, in his Chandalan form, challenged Shankaracharya's beliefs, engaging him in a profound debate on the absurdity of caste distinctions. He pointed out that all human beings, regardless of caste, bleed the same red blood, emphasizing the fundamental equality of all people. This realization shattered Shankaracharya's pre-

conceived notions, leading him to enlightenment. Through this divine test, Lord Shiva imparted the ultimate truth, that beyond social divisions, all human beings are one. Through dialogue and divine wisdom, he advocates for equality, questions social injustices, and emphasizes the oneness of all beings, ultimately conveying a powerful message of humility and justice.

As per the historian Dileep Menon, theyyam invokes Bhaktin's idea of the carnivalesque. In a carnivalesque scenario, the norms and restrictions of everyday life are suspended. This is similar to what happens during theyyam as the line between the spectator and the performer vanishes in the performance. Menon also highlights that theyyam opens up a space for inversion of roles traditionally assigned by the caste hierarchy (194-199). Menon states, "In the teyyattam, as in the Carnival, life was only subject to the laws of its own freedom. During this time all were equal." (200).

Another key aspect in theyyam performances is nature worship. The subaltern castes depend on nature for their everyday sustenance. They fear natural calamities, diseases, and things like crop failure. Many scholars point to the aspect of eco-fear or ecophobia which is part of tradition. According to Shankar, "To appease these deities through performing ritual art like theyyam in North-Malabar is a clear example of the indigenous reverential eco-fear (108). Theyyam is vital for the protection of ecology, avoiding natural calamities, and ensuring enough rainfall to maintain the fertile farmlands. This leads to a reverence for theyyam among the village community. This relation between ecology and theyyam is also reflected in the costumes they adorn. For example, the traditional waist attire of heroes, as seen in Kathivanur Veeran, is crafted from bamboo splints and wrapped in red cloth. In certain theyyams, such as Pottan Theyyam, masks are crafted from the leaf sheaths of the areca nut tree and wooden planks.

Methodology

This study analyzes 3,197 comments from the top 10 most popular YouTube videos on Theyyam, selected based on engagement metrics, including likes, views, and shares. The selection criteria ensured that the videos contained English subtitles, descriptions, and comments, allowing for broader accessibility and a more precise analysis of audience responses.

To systematically examine the comments, MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software,

was used to categorize and identify recurring themes within the discourse. The analysis is informed by multiple theoretical frameworks that help contextualize the digital transformation of Theyyam.

Richard M. Dorson's concept of "fakelore" is used to examine how theyyam, when mediated through digital platforms, risks becoming a commodified and decontextualized spectacle rather than an organically sustained tradition. Trevor J. Blank's idea of the internet as a folkloric space helps in understanding how online platforms function as new arenas for folk expression, where users actively participate in folklore's reinterpretation, circulation, and preservation. Henry Jenkins' theory of participatory culture provides insight into how audiences are not merely passive consumers but actively engage with theyyam through comments, debates, and digital interactions, shaping its meaning in online spaces. Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle is also employed to explore how theyyam's visual aesthetic when amplified through digital and commercialized performances shifts its perception from a lived ritual to a consumable cultural display designed for external audiences.

Theyyam in the Diaspora: Fakelore or Folklore?

Over the years with the advent of globalization, the folk ritual has also undergone several changes. Theyyam when performed outside its original context loses its ritualistic significance which gives rise to elements of 'fakelore' to be incorporated into the ritual. The term 'fakelore' was coined by American folklorist Richard M. Dorson in 1950. Dorson used the term to denote a synthetic product claiming to be authentic oral tradition but is tailored for mass edification (Dorson 5). The key contention behind the debate between folklore and fakelore is the question of authenticity. While the former has organically evolved and collected in the field from the practitioners of folk culture. The latter is a rewritten or artificial version of the original suited for commercial interests and modern audiences. The famous example is of Paul Bunyan whom Dorson categorizes as fakelore, recognizing that the character initially emerged from traditional tales shared by loggers in the Great Lakes region of North America. However, many of the widely known stories about Bunyan were later fabricated by an advertising writer for the Red River Lumber Company to serve commercial interests.

Similarly, in the case of theyyam, there are some

significant differences in the performances which happen in the diaspora. Theyyam owing to its popularity among the diasporic community is performed on decorated stages reducing it to a dance performance. The performance lacks several essential elements, including the *kavu* (local shrine), *chendakkaran* (drum beater), ancestral homes, and the presence of village communities.). According to Ralph, "Folklore lives its fullest, purest, and most natural life away from learned culture" (Boggs 5). In their ethnographic study of Theyyam, researchers Ajaya K. Sahoo and Surabhi K. highlight that while the ambiance created by the diasporic audience is commendable, they fail to replicate an authentic *kavu*, which is integral to the traditional performance. Instead, theyyam is staged in diaspora settings on decorated platforms, either in open grounds or enclosed auditoriums, detached from the true spirit of the art form. As a result, theyyam is reduced to a mere dance performance, shaped to suit the preferences of the diaspora audience rather than preserving its original ritualistic essence (Sahoo and Surabhi 14). Folklore is the medium that connects people with common factors in a foreign land. In the case of the diaspora, the folk ritual becomes the linking factor for them. As a result of globalization, theyyam has crossed boundaries and is often packaged as a dance performance in foreign countries for the diasporic audience.

Moving away from Alan Dundes's definition of folklore as the tradition shared by a group with common characteristics. Richard Bauman argues that folklore is not limited to a homogenous group but it is in the interaction of differential identities within and outside a group that forms the social base of folklore (31-35). This has some implications for theyyam as a folk ritual. Theyyam is performed by artists from marginalized communities and even among these communities there are significant differences that are visible in the performance through their dance, costume, makeup, and places of the performance. This differential identity takes a different meaning when theyyam is performed in the diasporic context as the shared identity brings people together but it also differentiates from the non-native audience who comes to watch the performance. In the context of theyyam in digital spaces, the differential identity distinguishes between the audience who is familiar with the tradition of the folk ritual and the audience who comes to enjoy the spectacle of the performance.

Theyyam as a Cultural Commodity:

Ritual to Spectacle

Dassan Manarakal points out that theyyams got exposed to national audience when they were invited to stage theyyams in ceremonies and functions such as Republic and Independence Day. Dasan argues that in such decontextualized performances, the performer loses autonomy over their cultural expressions. The allocation of space, time, sequence, duration, and everything is controlled by external forces. Consequently, a culture-specific ritual gets reduced to a mere object, the spectacular display of which is solely aimed at satisfying the voyeuristic eyes of the national elite (Dasan).

Beyond its formal ritualistic performances, Theyyam is also reproduced at a popular level through various entities, including political parties, student unions, trade unions, and cultural organizations. A notable example of this is the 23rd Party Congress of the CPI(M), held in Kannur (April 6–10, 2022), where the party prominently featured theyyam performers in its promotional posters. This could be seen as an attempt by the Communist Party to reinterpret theyyam's historical narrative of resistance against caste oppression through a Marxist lens, framing it as a struggle against class hierarchy. In doing so, the CPI(M) reshapes theyyam's subversive potential to align with its ideological discourse, potentially overlooking the ritual's deeply rooted caste dynamics.

It would be hasty to address all sorts of reworking of the original folklore as 'faklore'. Some Indian folklorists would defend the above example as an instance of applied folkloristics. Applied folkloristics refers to the use of folklore in modern society, including its application in education, heritage preservation, media, tourism, and political movements. While Richard M. Dorson doesn't explicitly use the term applied folklore, Dorson mentions how folkloristics can be used for national integration (Dorson 68). In the case of theyyam, the Kerala government has tried to promote theyyam as part of its cultural heritage. Government institutions like the Kerala Folklore Academy and KIR-TADS promote theyyam as part of the state's official cultural identity, but this comes with certain consequences such as erasing theyyam's critique of caste-based atrocities. Originally, theyyam was a form of Dalit-Bahujan defiance against upper-caste power. There are certain theyyams like Pottan theyyam which have stories of caste-based transgressions. However, in state-sponsored performances, this history is often muted or omitted, and theyyam is presented as a universal cultural tradition of Kerala, rather than a specific ritual of

marginalized communities. Attempts have also been made to align theyyam with a nationalist narrative by incorporating this folk ritual into Republic Day and Independence Day celebrations, the state neutralizes its radical history, integrating it into a homogenized national identity and stripping away its political subversiveness. Additionally, theyyam is increasingly commercialized for economic gain, with the tourism and culture ministries actively promoting it as a heritage attraction to enhance Kerala's global image. However, this commercialization often occurs without ensuring that the performer communities receive financial or social benefits.

In the above section, we saw how the folk ritual has been culturally appropriated by the state and cultural institutions but the tourism and media industry have also played an important role in spectacularizing theyyam for its aesthetic or visual appeal. This aestheticization of the folk ritual can be better understood with the theory of spectacle by Guy Debord. The French Marxist Guy Debord, 20th century his influential work *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), argues that in consumerist societies, human experiences or lived experiences are constantly replaced by images or curated representations that reflect a superficial reality (7). In the case of theyyam, a ritual deeply embedded in spiritual, social, and caste-based resistance, its transformation into a commercialized spectacle reflects this process.

Firstly, the tourism industry tries to package theyyam as a visual experience for foreigners and non-natives. The construction of miniature Kavus in hotel compounds and the arrangement of cameo theyyam performances for foreign tourists exemplify how authentic cultural practices are repackaged as consumable spectacles (Dasan). Instead of being part of a community's lived religious practice, theyyam is now a staged performance, designed to fit the expectations of an external gaze. The role of theyyam as a social counselor in the village is reduced to that of a performer in the artificial setting.

The media and entertainment industry are not far behind in reducing theyyam to a commodified spectacle to be relished in reality shows and cultural programs. We can see the use of Theyyam's headdress in TV shows, mega-events, and reality shows such as Asianet's use of Kuttichathan and Muchilottu Bhagavathi theyyam replicas further highlights how the spectacle absorbs and repurposes traditional symbols for entertainment (Dasan). In doing so, the deep cultural and spiritual dimen-

sions of Theyyam are subordinated to mere visual grandeur, reinforcing Debord's idea that the spectacle prioritizes appearance over essence. These mediated versions of theyyam create an illusion of cultural authenticity while simultaneously detaching it from its original context, reducing it to an aestheticized, consumable image.

Debord's theory helps us understand how Theyyam, once a lived, ritualistic experience, is increasingly transformed into a commodified spectacle. Whether through advertisements, tourism, political parades, or media productions, Theyyam is detached from its original social and religious context and repurposed as a passive visual object for consumption. This shift represents a loss of lived meaning, where the ritual no longer serves its original purpose but instead functions as a branded cultural product within the spectacle-driven economy.

Digital Platforms as New Folk Spaces

The study of folklore in the modern era is not limited to understanding the 'folk' and the 'lore' in the traditional sense. According to Simon J. Bronner, the internet as a space fundamentally changes the way folklore is disseminated, consumed, and produced by the audience (25). The reception of the folk performance takes a new meaning when it is disseminated through new media platforms. Platforms such as Facebook; Twitter or YouTube are curators of public discourse at the same time reflecting a worldview of the online community on folk performances. With the advent of Web 2.0, the internet was no longer restricted to a static space but it led to the internet being an interactive and participatory medium for users (Hansen 203). The idea of participation in the traditional folk culture is transformed in the new media spaces where the audience interacts with traditional folk material in the forms of views, likes, dislikes reactions, shares, and comments. This is what Henry Jenkins terms as participatory culture in new media where audience or consumers are not passively consuming media but they actually participate in creation, engagement and circulation of media (290). The growth of the cyberspace also led to the reconceptualization of internet as a site of community engagement and folk transmission. Digital engagement with theyyam through social networking spaces such as Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube keeps the diasporic audience connected with the culture of their homeland. Digital spaces also blur the boundary between the local and global, as though, theyyam is performed in a

local setting and transcends the local boundaries when it is uploaded on social media sites to reach the global audience i.e. the diasporic Malayalees and non-native in this case.

A quick search on Google trends about 'theyyam' on YouTube reveals that theyyam is more popular in gulf countries like UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, etc compared to India as a result of its popularity among the diasporic Malayalees. This comes as a surprise considering the folk ritual originated and is widely practiced in Kerala. The diasporic Malayalees by watching these videos uploaded on the video-sharing platform Youtube experience a sense of nostalgia for their homeland. When recordings of theyyam from their region are posted on YouTube, it gives them a major sense of belonging, as does the movies and music for the Malayalee migrants (Sahoo and Surabhi 5).

The popularity of theyyam is not limited to YouTube but it includes other social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram as well. There are dedicated groups on Theyyam and associated terms of theyyam on Facebook. The administrators of shrines also post important information regarding the ritual like schedules and other announcements on Facebook groups (Puthussery 3). These YouTube videos on theyyam are often captured by foreign vloggers, tourists, professional photographers, etc. The phenomenon of capturing the visuals also pushes the theyyam artist to perform risky stunts which leads to mishaps and accidents. One such incident involved a Bappiriyan theyyam where the performer climbed up a coconut tree to perform risky stunts which led to him falling from the coconut tree and breaking his leg in the process ("Bedridden Gods"). This led to a lot of criticism from the mainstream media while some commented that such stunts are not part of the ritual but performed to enhance theatrical effect. The rise in the number of videos uploaded exponentially increased with the coming of smartphones which made it easier to capture the photos and videos which are uploaded to social networking sites instantly.

Most studies on theyyam tend to look at theyyam from a top-down approach but a bottom-up approach is equally beneficial in understanding the reception of the audience towards these performances. The top-down approach includes the ritual from the perspective of government institutions, academic institutions, tourism, and the media industry, The bottom-up approach includes understanding the perspective of performers, devotees, and the digital community. By analyzing the com-

ments retrieved from the top 10 popular videos, we can understand the digital cultural record of the theyyam performances on YouTube.

Results of YouTube Comments Analysis

The analysis of 3,197 YouTube comments from the top 10 most popular Theyyam videos reveals diverse audience engagements, ranging from discussions on ritual authenticity and caste identity to aesthetic admiration and debates on Theyyam’s religious positioning.

One of the most prominent themes (7.88%) was Ritual & Similar Traditions, where viewers highlighted Theyyam’s sacred significance and its deep-rooted connection to Kerala’s temple traditions. Many expressed reverence for the ritual, emphasizing its spiritual and cultural value. For instance, one user noted, *"Theyyam is a divine ritual, not just a dance performance."* Another viewer remarked, *"This is an ancient tradition that should be preserved in its purest form."*

Theme of comments	Percentage of Comments
Ritual & Similar Traditions	252 comments (7.88%)
Authenticity, Real vs. Drama Debates	176 comments (5.51%)
Caste-Based Comments	140 comments (4.38%)
Aesthetics (Makeup, Costume, Visual Appeal)	124 comments (3.88%)
Subaltern vs. Mainstream Hinduism	82 comments (2.56%)
Social Issues (Discrimination, Inequality, etc.)	6 comments (0.19%)
Miscellaneous (Unclassified Comments)	344 comments (10.76%)

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Comments on Various Aspects of Theyyam in the YouTube Comment Section.

Debates over authenticity (5.51%) were also common, with many viewers questioning whether Theyyam is being commercialized or staged for tourists. Some users strongly rejected modern adaptations, with comments like *"This is not real Theyyam. It's just a performance for tourists!"* and *"Fake one, just drama!"* Others, however, defended Theyyam’s evolving nature, arguing that visibility in digital media helps preserve the tradition.

Caste-based discussions (4.38%) emerged as a significant area of engagement, particularly around Theyyam’s origins in marginalized communities and the ongoing caste hierarchies affecting its performers. Some users critiqued how Theyyam artists are treated with reverence during the ritual but return to a lower social status afterward, as one comment stated, *"They worship these performers*

as gods for one night but treat them as untouchables the next day." Another emphasized its subaltern roots, saying, *"This is a Dalit tradition, not something Brahmins ever performed."*

The aesthetic appeal of Theyyam (3.88%) also captivated audiences, with many praising the intricate face paint, elaborate costumes, and dramatic visual elements of the performance. One viewer enthusiastically commented, *"The face paint and headgear are absolutely mesmerizing!"* Another added, *"The details in the costume are stunning! This looks otherworldly."* These reactions suggest that, for some audiences, theyyam is appreciated primarily as a visual spectacle rather than a ritualistic experience.

A smaller but important theme (2.56%) involved discussions on Theyyam’s place within Hinduism, with some asserting that it is a subaltern folk practice distinct from Vedic traditions, while others argued that it is an integral part of Hinduism. A

comment reflecting this tension stated, *"Theyyam is not a Brahminical ritual; it belongs to Dalit traditions."* Conversely, another user countered, *"Theyyam has always been part of Hinduism, just in a different form."*

While discussions on social issues (0.19%)

such as modernization, discrimination, and performer exploitation were present, they were far less common compared to debates on authenticity, caste, and aesthetics. A rare comment addressing this issue noted, *"Even after the performance, these artists go back to being treated as untouchables."*

Finally, 10.76% of the comments fell under miscellaneous categories, consisting of general reactions, jokes, and unrelated discussions.

Conclusion

Theyyam, traditionally a sacred ritual deeply embedded in Kerala’s cultural and caste-based histories, is undergoing profound transformations in the digital age. This study has demonstrated how Theyyam’s migration to digital spaces, especially on platforms like YouTube and social media, has not only expanded its reach but also led to new modes of engagement, reinterpretation, and contestation. The analysis of 3,197 YouTube com-

ments reveals that audiences interact with theyyam in multiple ways, engaging in authenticity debates, caste discussions, aesthetic admiration, and religious positioning.

The findings highlight how digital spectatorship has blurred the boundaries between the local and the global. Although theyyam remains a deeply rooted ritual practice in Kerala, its performance in diasporic contexts and online media spaces raises concerns about fakelore, commercialization, and the spectacle-driven economy. This shift from a sacred ritual to a consumable digital performance reflects Debord's theory of the spectacle, where lived experiences become curated images for mass consumption. At the same time, participatory culture, as theorized by Henry Jenkins, ensures that theyyam is not merely passively consumed but actively debated, shared, and redefined by digital audiences.

A key tension emerging from the study is the role of caste and authenticity in digital discussions. While some users assert that theyyam is an inherently subaltern tradition resisting Brahminical Hinduism, others argue for its inclusion in mainstream Hindu discourse. Caste mobility within the performance is temporary, and the social position of theyyam performers remains precarious once the ritual concludes. However, the digital presence of theyyam fosters new forms of agency, allowing marginalized communities to narrate their histories, assert cultural ownership, and engage in global conversations about identity and tradition.

Digital spaces serve as new folk spaces where folklore is not just preserved but actively produced, contested, and reshaped. Theyyam, in this new media landscape, becomes a site of negotiation between tradition and commodification, subalternity and mainstream religious discourse, local specificity, and global visibility. While the spectacularization of theyyam raises concerns about authenticity and decontextualization, its digital circulation ensures that it remains a living, evolving cultural practice, constantly reinterpreted by its audience across physical and virtual landscapes.

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