



Popularity of Ritual Arts in Kerala: A Case Study of *Theeyatu*

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Abstract

Kerala is a state which has varied cultural and religious traditions. One of the most famous religious traditions is ritual arts like Theyyam, Thira, and Mudi yettu. Theeyatu is one of the ritual art forms observed in the southern part, where the ancient kingdom of Tiruvithankoor and Kochi. Theeyatu has its belief system, dressing style, music, and prior preparations, and it also has a different concept of art form. There are numerous studies conducted on different ritual art forms in Kerala. However, in the case of Theeyatu, only a few studies were done. People from the northern part of Kerala are unaware of this art form, while those from the southern part are aware but do not recognize the significance of the art form.

This study will focus on the popularity of Theeyatu and its awareness level in the southern part of Kerala, especially in the Ernakulam district. Thus, for this purpose, I did a combination of qualitative and quantitative research, mainly the interview

method of data collection and analysis done by charts, graphs, and explanations. The sampling method adopted was stratified random sampling. I selected a total of 125 people for the study from five places in the Ernakulam district of Kerala.

Keywords: *Theeyatu, ritual art, Kerala, Popularity.*

I. Introduction

Kerala has a rich cultural heritage that includes classical dance forms, traditional music, martial arts, and also traditional temple festivals. Kerala is also referred to as God's own country due to its natural beauty.

Ritual art is deeply intertwined with its cultural and religious heritage. These ritual arts encompass various forms of dance, music, drama, and other performing arts that are performed as a part of religious ceremonies, temple festivals, and cultural events.

As an art form, rituals have three components: myth, ritual, and theatre. Whereas the basic structure of each of these does not change, alterations and improvisations have always been accommodated. For instance, the singers of the myth have the freedom to delete certain sections, sometimes create new myths, or connect the existing ones with contemporary social life. Similarly, it is possible to reduce the duration of the ritual. The repetitive parts can be removed to avoid monotony and make it look more attractive, the ritual objects can be replaced, etc. For instance, *theyyattom* in Kerala requires toddy as one of its ritual objects. At one time when prohibition came into force, toddy was replaced with tender coconut water.

So many ritual art forms came into existence. Some of them are Theyyam, Tira, Mudi yettu, Padayani, Poorakali, Theeyatu, etc... This study is based on one of the ritual art forms called Theeyatu.



History of Theeyatu

Theeyatu is a traditional art form of Kerala that started in the ancient days of the kingdom. During the reign of upper-caste people called namboothiries, in Kerala, smallpox severely attacked the place called Thrikkariyoor and its surroundings. Many had lost their lives. Scared namboothiries took shelter under their deities, Thrikkariyoorapan and Shri Parameshwaran, where they usually offer prayers during scary circumstances. At this time also, so many people participated in the prayer.

At the end of so many days of prayer, Parashuram (6th avatar of Lord Vishnu) appeared and lit a torch from the permanent lamp (lighted by Mandadav, a holy man) and gave it to a young boy of Panachimangalam illam (Brahmin traditional house), who was the devotee of Badrakali (one of the avatars of God Durga). After he received the light and invoked the spirit of God, he started to dance. At the end of the dance, he blessed all the people there with that torch.

God was pleased by the young boy, and he said that if with this torch anyone is blessed, all diseases will get cured and, also said to spread this to the whole world. Every year after this incident, the boy who received the torch from the god danced in front of Goddess Badrakali; from this, they believed that they would be free from all the bad things around them. Later, the heredity of this boy became theeyatu unnikal, and this worship became theeyatu.

Belief of Theeyatu

Thiri uzichil, pantham uzichil, and mudi uzichil are some of the customs of Theeyatu. People believe that this will cure all the diseases. Kalammayikkal (rubbing of Rangoli) is a ritual in theeyatu, and there is a belief that if you take this Prasada (the powder that used to draw Rangoli) to your home, you will recover from the diseases that affected you. The last ritual of theeyatu is to give 'nivedyam' to Lord Shiva. There is a belief that Lord Shiva and Lord Durga will bless everyone who presents in ritual.

Popularity of Theeyatu

Nowadays, Theeyatu is a practice observed in every Durga temple, irrespective of caste discrimination. On Thiruvathira, celebrated in January, Theeyatu takes place in Thrikkariyoor temple, where the tradition of lighting the torch originates. Kunnan Kulagara Bhagavathy temple is also practicing this custom. Pallipurathu Kavay in Kottayam, Ponkavu Bhagavathy temple, Edapally

Vadakumbagam Puthukulangara Durga temple, Nayarambalam Bhagavathy temple are the main temples that uphold this tradition. Thripunithura, Cherthala, Thaikatusheri, Thiruvalla, Haripadu, Edapally, and Manjummel are the places that are renowned for Theeyatu. Swarnathu Mana, Medangal Mana, and Mazhavanoor Varyam are the famous families that do this custom of Theeyatu, with the Kodakashery family the one that holds this custom of Theeyatu every year.

Problems affecting Theeyatu

Due to the growing popularity of Theeyatu, many devotees are attracted to it. However, the lack of performers is the main problem that affects this ritual art. Traditional customs like 'Kalam maykal' (removing the Rangoli) and other customs of Theeyatu should be done by the performer only. But now the trend of performers neglecting these customs and laziness of performers towards these customs and beliefs causes problems and hurts the feelings of people.

Solution for the problem

A group of people and performers in theeyatu has started a school known as 'Sree Badra Kala Samajam' to tackle and mitigate the shortage of theeyatu performers and practice. Today, this institution provides an opportunity for many people to learn theeyatu in this school, and hope that the shortage of theeyatu performers will be solved in the coming years.

Objectives

- To find out the popularity of Theeyatu among the people of the southern part of Kerala.
- To understand Theeyatu and its belief system.
- To know about the performers and prior preparation of Theeyatu.
- To analyze the dressing style and songs of Theeyatu.

II. Methodology

Kerala has varied cultural and religious traditions, among which the most famous religious traditions are ritual arts like Theyyam, Thira, and Mudiyyettu. Theeyatu stands out as a significant ritual art form practiced in the southern regions of Kerala, that's once part of the ancient kingdom of Tiruvithankoor and Kochi. Theeyatu, with its unique belief system, distinctive attire, music, and prior preparations, embodies a distinct art form with this tradition. Despite numerous studies on various ritual art forms in Kerala, theeyatu remains relatively underexplored among the people from



the northern region of Kerala. Even within the southern communities, there is a limited understanding of the significance of Theeyatu.

Hence, this study aims to focus on the popularity and awareness level of Theeyatu, particularly in the Ernakulam district in the southern region of Kerala.

Area for study

The study was conducted across different places in Ernakulam district of Kerala. It involved a combined approach of both Qualitative and Quantitative research methodologies.

Construction of tools (Interview)

A questionnaire consisting of 25 questions was developed for data collection from a sample of 125 people.

Sampling

The sampling method adopted was stratified random sampling to guide the selection process of conducting the interview. The sample population was people aged between 10 to 64 years in five places in the Ernakulam district of Kerala.

Sample size and composition

The five places chosen for the study are Edappally, Manjummel, Kunnumpuram, Paravoor, and Eloor. Interviews were conducted among the people in each of these places in equal numbers. A total of 125 people were included in the sample population, with 25 people from each place selected based on their age. Each group consisted of 5 members, categorized by age ranges: 10 to 20 comprising the first group, 21 to 31 comprising the 2nd group, 32 to 42 comprising the third group, 43 to 53 comprising the fourth group, and 54 to 64 comprising the fifth group.

To study the popularity of ritual arts in Kerala: A case study of Theeyatu, I conducted interviews with 125 people. The questions covered various aspects of theeyatu:

1. Are you familiar with Theeyatu?
2. Do you know the beliefs associated with Theeyatu?
3. Do you like the traditional dress worn during Theeyatu?

4. Do you know the significance of *kalamezhuthu* (Rangoli) in Theeyatu?
5. Do you know about *sandayakotu* (evening beat) in Theeyatu?
6. Do you know the lyrics of the song sung in between Theeyatu?
7. Are you interested in listening to the song during Theeyatu performances?
8. Do you have faith in this ritual art form?
9. Do you think that these days also people are interested in watching Theeyatu?
10. Do you attend Theeyatu every year?
11. Have you noticed any difference in the viewership of Theeyatu in recent years?
12. Do you think that the schedule of Theeyatu is appropriate?
13. Do you understand why Theeyatu is performed only in temples?
14. Can you name any one performer's name?
15. Do you know the places in Kerala where Theeyatu is performing?
16. Do you know the significance of the name Theeyatu?
17. Who are the characters in Theeyatu?
18. Which are the musical instruments used in Theeyatu?
19. Do you know the importance of the crown worn during Theeyatu?
20. Do you know which powders are used for Kalamezhuthu (Rangoli)?
21. Can you experience any specialty in the rhythm used in Theeyatu?
22. What is the difference between the earlier and the current period Theeyatu performances?
23. What is your personal experience with Theeyatu?
24. Theeyatu is viewed just as an art form and not as a belief. Give your clarification.
25. What do you think about the popularity of Theeyatu among the people in your locality?

Analysis

Analyzing the responses to all the questions was challenging. Overall, feedback was good, indicating people have familiarity with theeyatu and its associated beliefs. This is a good sign for the current treatment of traditional ritual arts.

When summarizing each of the responses, we can see that the age group between 54 - 64 had a vast knowledge about Theeyatu while the youngest age group (10 to 20) had the least.

Of the questions posed to the age group 10-20, only three received notable answers. Firstly, for question number 3 regarding the dressing style



of theyyatu, a substantial 80% responded positively. Secondly, for question number 6, regarding the familiarity of lyrics, around 68% of individuals did not know about it. The last question was question number 12, regarding whether the schedule of Theyyatu is proper. 80% responded it as positive. Among these three questions, two questions were notable for this age group, and they got positive feedback.

It is intimidating to notice that in question number 16, regarding the significance of the name theyyatu, and question number 20, regarding the importance of kalamezhuthu, nearly 88% of the individuals did not have an answer. It is miserable that people didn't know about one of our ancient customs and traditions. The other thing that was noticed during the analysis was in question number 7, regarding the interest in listening to the songs during Theyyattu, around 95% of the individuals in the age groups, 10-20 and 54-64 had a positive response. It is truly great.

From the analysis, it was revealed that 100% of individuals in the age group 43-53 attend Theyyatu every year without fail. The rest of the age group has inconveniences such as health issues, exams, and jobs to attend the ritual.

In question number 11, regarding the difference in the viewership of Theyyatu, nearly 80% of individuals in all age groups have negative responses. The other thing noticed is that, in question number 9, regarding the interest of individuals to watch theyyatu, the age groups 43-53 and 54-64 got 100% positive responses.

This way, from this research, it is proved confidently that the age group between 54-64 knows all the customs and traditions of Theyyattu. However, the rest of the age groups know this ritual art form but not as well as the last age group.

In summary, all the age groups selected for the sample population have unique ways of understanding our traditions and culture. Happily, children are also passionate about our culture and traditional ritual arts. We can hope that we can preserve our cultural practices through our younger generations.

III. Conclusion

The study was conducted to understand the popularity of ritual arts in Kerala as a case study of Theyyatu. For this purpose, I selected 5 places to interview the people and selected a sample population of 125 people who were divided into 5 groups based on their age.

After the analysis, the researcher found that the age group between 10-20 shows a notable

interest in this traditional ritual art form because of its traditional dressing style and the songs sung during the ritual. So, in this case, we can acclaim that ritual art is popular among children, and this is also one of the objectives. The age group between 21-31 and 32-42 believes in this traditional ritual art form but is not interested in watching it because of many difficulties like exams and Jobs. So, from this, it is proven that the belief system of theyyatu is popular among people. It is also another objective of the study. The last one is the history, performance, and preparations of theyyatu; the age group between 43-53 and 54-64 are the people who cleared all the queries regarding this. So, it concluded that theyyatu is popular among these people also.

As a conclusion to this study, the researcher proved that Theyyatu is popular in Ernakulam district, and in this case, it also concludes that ritual arts are popular in Kerala.

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