

**Authenticity of Public Folklore:
A Performance Analysis of Theyyam Enactments**

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Abstract:

This paper examines the multifaceted idea of authenticity in folklore within the context of a fast-changing world, with a particular focus on the public performance and dissemination of theyyam in North Malabar, Kerala. By examining the procedures involved in making theyyam public and analysing the effects of public dissemination on the traditional and private components of folklore, this study aims to uncover the essence of authenticity. Qualitative research methods such as ethnographic investigations, interviews, and content analysis are used to explore the complex dynamics of making theyyam public, as well as to determine and evaluate the most effective methods for producing authentic and interesting public folklore. The results of this study will help us to understand how folklore is preserved, presented, and modified in communities, and will offer useful insights into direct actions for cultural preservation.

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

Introduction

Folklore helps groups reinforce their identity and values. The stories, symbols, rituals etc. embed cultural knowledge and teach morals. Folklore persists but also adapts over time - it

"remains wholly within the control of its practitioners" to remember, change or forget. Folklore practitioners, or the members of the community who actively take part in its development, preservation, and adaptation, are in charge of the field of folklore. Because of its flexibility, folklore is able to continue evolving as a live, breathing representation of the ideals, identity, and experiences of the communities that create and preserve it. (*Folklore - New World Encyclopedia*).

In today's rapidly changing world, the significance of authenticity in public folklore cannot be overstated. Authenticity plays a crucial role in preserving the essence and integrity of folklore traditions, ensuring that they are accurately represented and passed down to future generations (Urdea). While the concept of authenticity has evolved over time and is subject to various interpretations, it remains a central concern in the field of folklore, (Kõmmus).

The public space of folklore is the representation and recreation of folklore in new contours and contexts within and beyond the communities in which they originated. Folklore's public sphere is a dynamic process of adaptation and change rather than just a passive duplication of traditional forms. Folklore is reinterpreted and reshaped as it confronts new audiences, cultures, and social realities in novel environments (Baron and Spitzer).

Authenticity in public folklore refers to the extent to which the performance and dissemination of traditional cultural practices accurately reflect their original form and cultural context. The concept of public folklore refers to the study and preservation of folklore within a larger societal context. It recognizes that folklore is not just confined to traditional communities but is also a public and shared cultural heritage. In the context of public folklore, authenticity plays a crucial role in defining and understanding the value of these cultural expressions.

Theyyam is an ancient ritual form of worship, originating from primitive cultures that existed even before the advent of Hinduism in the region. This ritualistic performance is characterized by elaborate and vibrant enactments featuring dance, music, vibrant costumes, and intricate rituals. It holds significant cultural, social, and spiritual importance within the communities where it is practiced. *Theyyam* ceremonies are not only religious rituals but also serve as a means of communal bonding, storytelling, and preservation of local traditions and ancestral heritage ("History of Theyyam"). This paper examines the multifaceted idea of authenticity in folklore within the context of a fast-changing world, with a particular focus on the public performance and dissemination of *theyyam* in North Malabar, Kerala.

Background of the Study

According to famous semiticist Theodor H Gaster “Folklore is that part of people’s culture, which is preserved consciously or unconsciously, in beliefs and practices, customs, and observances of general currency in myths, legends, and tales of common acceptance, and in arts and crafts that express the temper and genius of a group rather than of an individual. Because it is a repository of popular traditions and an integral element of the popular traditions and an integral element of the popular climate, folklore serves as a constant source and frame of reference for more formal literature and art; but it is distinct therefrom in that it is essentially of the people, by the people, and for the people”(“Definitions of Folklore”).

The function of folklore is as a dynamic archive of cultural traditions, including a wide range of components essential to a group's or community's identity. In contrast to more structured forms of art and literature, folklore is anchored in the lives and expressions of everyday people, and serves as an important element of cultural legacy.

As a living cultural expression, folklore includes an immense variety of myths, traditions, practices, and artistic expressions that have been handed down over generations. The essence of a community's identity, history, and values is included in its folklore. However, the dynamics of folklore preservation and distribution have experienced considerable changes in the modern era, characterized by globalization, digital communication, and increased cultural interaction. Authenticity in folklore is a key challenge that emerges in this changing environment.

The degree to which a particular folklore feature, such as a story, song, dance, or ritual, remains faithful to its traditional and cultural roots is referred to as authenticity. This exemplifies the notion that folklore ought to accurately reflect the values, customs, and cultural legacy of the society from which it derives. Questions about folklore authenticity become more important as people enter the public sphere more frequently through events, performances, digital media, and even commercial endeavours. What effects does the dissemination of folklore have on authenticity? When folklore is shared with a larger audience, it loses its original meaning or does it change to reflect how society is changing.

The people of North Malabar see *theyyam* as gods who live beyond death. The *theyyam* rituals are primarily carried out in North Malabar, mostly in the districts of Kannur, and Kasaragod. Kerala is home to approximately four hundred *theyyam*. Each of them had mythology. Every *theyyam* myth is presented in the form of *thottam pattu*. The *thottam* was sung before the tying of *theyyam*.

This study's analysis of the complex facets of authenticity in folklore and the complex interactions between the traditional, private, and public aspects of folklore propagation make it significant. The conflict between maintaining *theyyam* and disseminating it to a wider audience emerges as civilizations change and adapt to modern environments. To ensure that *theyyam* continues to be a lively and important cultural heritage, researchers and folklorists have to deal with the multifaceted nature of this tension.

By examining the procedures involved in making *theyyam* public and examining the effects of public dissemination on the traditional and private components of folklore, this study aims to examine the dynamics of making *theyyam* public, including the functions of communities, folklorists, and other stakeholders. It also determines and evaluate the most effective methods for producing authentic and interesting public folklore.

This study has significant academic value since it improves our understanding of the idea of authenticity in the context of folklore. It sheds light on the complex operational facets of public folklore and offers useful insights into direct actions for cultural preservation A significant endeavour that can advance our knowledge of folklore, public performance, and the human condition is the study of *theyyam* enactments. It is a complicated topic with many facets that needs more study and consideration.

This study intends to uncover the essence of authenticity in folklore within the context of a fast-changing world using qualitative research methods such as interviews, and content analysis.

Authenticity and Folklore

The word "authentic" comes from the Greek word "authentēs," which has the dual meanings of "one who acts with authority" and "made by one's own hand." The definition is deepened and contrasted with the commodification that the term has undergone in a market that is Western-driven by Lionel Trilling's memory of "the violent meanings which are explicit in the Greek ancestry of the word": Authentēo: to control completely; likewise, to murder. In addition to being a master and a doer, Authentēs was also a killer and even a suicide(Bendix). The meaning of "authentēs" from Lionel Trilling's perspective adds another level of complication to the idea of authenticity. Trilling points out that the word "authentēs" has aggressive overtones in its Greek ancestry. "Authentēo" can imply "to control completely," suggesting a form of dominance or authority that isn't always helpful. Contrary to the contemporary favourable associations with authenticity, it can also imply "to murder," which is a sharp contrast.

Over time, the idea of authenticity in folklore has changed due to a variety of influences, including cultural upheavals, technological development, and shifting perspectives in the area of folklore studies. In search of ancient stories, songs, and practises to record and preserve, historians and collectors developed the concept of "authentic folklore" in the 18th century(Bendix). The originality and purity of folklore, which is frequently connected to rural or pre-industrial populations, were the focal points of this early understanding of authenticity. The idea of authenticity grew increasingly complicated as folklore studies matured as a field of study. Researchers in Friesland, Netherlands, including AA. Jaarsma, started to wonder what influence the collector had on the shaping and interpretation of the narratives they were collecting (Venbrux and Meder).

Early folklore studies' emphasis on originality and purity mirrored a romanticised picture of rural life and a desire to conserve what were perceived as disappearing customs. But throughout time, this notion of authenticity has changed. Folklorists of today understand that folklore is dynamic and always changing, impacted by both internal and external forces. They emphasise that authenticity should include the manner in which folk traditions adapt and evolve within their cultural contexts and not just be connected to historical continuity or opposition to change. This more open-minded viewpoint enables a deeper comprehension of the diversity and vitality of folklore in different communities, both rural and urban.

The term "authentic" seems to be problematic because it implies that the problem has been identified and that this identification calls into question authenticity.(Venbrux and Meder)

Authenticity disputes continued throughout the 20th century, involving cultural theorists, art dealers, music critics, and tour operators. Particularly in Germany and the United States, folklore studies investigated the desire for authenticity as well as how it was created and given disciplinary validity. Modern folklore studies are still struggling with the idea of authenticity. Folklore is today acknowledged by academics to be a dynamic and ever-evolving cultural expression, impacted by a variety of variables including globalisation, migration, and technology. The emphasis now is on comprehending the creation, transmission, and adaptation processes that define folk traditions in the contemporary era rather than on finding an "authentic" portrayal of folklore.

Authenticity has a crucial role in striking a balance between continuity and change, or "conservatism and dynamism," in folklore(Bendix). Folklore's authenticity helps people feel more connected to their culture and ancestry. The ideas, values, traditions, and oral history of a specific community or group are embodied in traditional folklore. It acts as an archive for their knowledge and experiences, contributing to the definition of who they are as a people.

Impact of digital technology on authenticity of folklore

The authenticity of folklore has been significantly impacted by digital technologies. According to folklorist Trevor J. Blank, internet folklore is just as genuine as its in-person equivalent (*Understanding Folk Culture in the Digital Age: An Interview with Folklorist Trevor J. Blank, Pt. 1 | The Signal*). Folklorist Alan Dundes contends that although some people may be concerned that technology is eradicating folklore, it is actually becoming an essential component in its transmission (Bacon).

Economic Impact

Through the exchange of cultural goods on the international market, the commodification of folklore has the potential to raise its economic value. Also, it can give source communities the money they need to maintain their culture, allowing traditional craftspeople to continue making their goods. The sacrifices made to satisfy consumer expectations might distort traditional meanings, endangering their long-term survival (Pager).

Intellectual property rights

Proposals to pass legislation protecting intangible property rights in traditional cultural expressions (TCE) and folklore have arisen from discussions about the need to control the detrimental impacts of commodification on traditional/indigenous populations and the underlying source traditions (*Folklore and Commercialization*). Some contend that folklore is typically believed to consist of rejected and uncanonized knowledge, and that if it is revived, it could become commercialised. Additionally, there are continuous efforts both domestically and globally to provide traditional knowledge and cultural expressions—including folklore—sui generis protection (*Intellectual Property and Traditional Cultural Expressions/Folklore*)

Public folklore

Public folklore is created through activities like fieldwork, interpretation, or programming that showcase folklore and folklife to the public with the linked aims of education and entertainment. Folklorists transform folklore into public folklore (Baron and Spitzer). Through programming that depicts the typical performance situations and emphasises folklore as a living heritage, public folklore embodies a dynamic approach. The presentation and application of folk traditions in new forms and situations both within and outside of the

communities in which they originated are necessary for the transformation of folklore into public folklore(Muthukumaraswamy and Kaushal).

The documenting, preservation, and promotion of traditional and folk cultural expressions within a community or culture are the main objectives of this field of study and practice. It entails the examination of the beliefs, practices, traditions, and artistic expressions of different groups of people, frequently with a focus on the cultural legacy of unrepresented or marginalised communities.

Process of making public folklore

- Collection and documentation of folk traditions, tales, rites, music, art, and other expressions is one of the first steps in making folklore accessible to the general population. This information may be gathered by folklorists, ethnographers, and community members through interviews, fieldwork, recordings, and written documents.
- Folklore items are frequently archived and preserved in order to ensure that they survive. This could entail constructing actual archives in libraries or museums and digitising content for online access. Folklore is preserved so that future generations can access it.
- Public folklore frequently includes educational programmes designed to increase knowledge and comprehension of traditional cultural practises. Workshops, talks, storytelling sessions, and school projects that encourage people to learn about and participate in folk traditions fall under this group of activities.
- Folklore is shared with the communities from where it originated. To ensure accurate depiction and respect for cultural practises, community involvement is essential. Collaboration also enables the process to be responsive to community needs and cultural sensitivity.
- Making folklore accessible to the general public requires both interpretation and contextualization of the information for various audiences. To help the general audience grasp the relevance and meaning of the folklore, folklorists and curators may provide historical, cultural, and social context.(*Folklorists | About Folklife & Traditional Arts | New Hampshire Folklife*)

Theyyam as ritual

Kerala's northern region, Malabar, has a distinct culture from the rest of the state. Additionally, there are differences between North Malabar, which includes the districts of Kannur and Kasaragod, and South Malabar. The customs, rituals, and manner of life of the people all reflect this distinction. *Theyyam* is a ritual. The sociocultural milieu that creates and maintains *theyyam*, as well as the transcendental idea that underpins it, are unique to North Malabar (Payyanāṭ and Prakash). Communities such as *Vannan*, *Malayan*, *Mavilan*, *Velan*, *Munnoottan*, *Anjunnoottan*, *Pulayar*, *Kopalar*, and others are dedicated to the *theyyam* performers. Every artist portrays a powerful hero, and performers dress in extravagant clothes and apply a lot of makeup. Awe and wonder are evoked by the absolutely spectacular headgear and ornaments. The ritual dance is accompanied by a choir of musical instruments, including

theyyam can be regarded as a possession trance that involves transformation of consciousness, of identity and bodily changes. In the ritual context, “possession trance includes the shared belief that such changes result from the takeover of the body and person of the actor by another entity – a spirit, an ancestor, another living person or even an animal. The self of the actor is in abeyance and the behaviour presented is that of the other, so that major transformations are accepted” Bourguignon (2004) (V.R. and Sheeja).

Numerous rituals are performed before the *theyyam* performance. First, the artist (*Kolakaran*) receives an indication; thereafter, the performance date is confirmed and the artist is notified. Three, five, or seven days of fasting are needed to prepare *theyyam*. During this time, the performer is required to stay at home and is not permitted to eat any non-vegetarian food. *Vellattam* or *Thottam* is the name given to the opening segment of the *theyyam* performance. Following the completion of the ritual song (*thottam*), the *Kolakaran* makes an appearance on stage dressed appropriately. Face makeup comes in a variety of patterns, and the colours used to create them are taken from natural sources such as *Chayilyam*, *Karimazhi*, *Aripodi*, and *Maniyola*. The types of *theyyam* will vary in terms of their facial makeup, attire, and accessories.

The *thottam* songs are an essential part of the *theyyam* ritual. They render the story of the deity propitiated in this ceremonial performance and empower the performer to attain a psychological state of association with the deity. The performer himself sings the *thottam* songs, so that he can get in the exact frame of mind and the necessary spirit of the persona he is presumed to embody. The musical instruments are played in time to the performer's movements making the performance pious. For the audience, the performances generate a

powerful aesthetic milieu and mood, creating an immediate feeling of pleasure and ease individual and communal anxieties(V.R. and Sheeja). Accompanied by traditional instruments, the musicians perform a ritual song that narrates the myth and customs of how the shrine's deity came to be revered. A short interval is followed by the dancer's ritualistic entry inside the temple, complete with ornate makeup and costumes. Then he sits down in front of the shrine, puts on the headdress, the most revered item in the ensemble, and gradually transforms into the shrine's particular deity. The *theyyam* performs and dances across the courtyard and temple. Not to mention, the dancer blesses the audience by giving out rice and turmeric powder. As long as the headgear is on, people consider him to be heavenly. The real power of *theyyam* comes from calling upon well-known goddesses like Bhagavathi, warriors like *Vishnumoorthi*, and ancestor spirits using traditional attire, headgear, and face paints made of plant-based pigments. An energetic and mesmerising atmosphere is created by singing *thottam pattu* and using traditional percussion instruments like the *chenda*, *kuzhal*, and *elathalam*.

The fundamental ritual framework of purification procedures remains unaltered, assuming the heavenly character and bestowing blessings onto believers. Modified narratives, staging areas, and props are examples of reinterpretations that adapt to new social circumstances while maintaining their significance for both insiders and outsiders.

Theyyam performance in public sphere

When *theyyam* is performed in its actual cultural setting, it is a highly private art form. However, the same *theyyam* is shown as an exhibition rather than as a part of the ritual; in the context of films, advertisement, or other cultural events, this is referred to as a public performance. Folklore presented in this way is referred to as public folklore. No mythology, belief, worship, etc. shall exist here.

Unlike the formally mediated *theyyam* performed in such formal contexts, popular *theyyam* are also produced at this level. Among the organisations engaged in this act of projecting themselves into the public mind are political parties, youth and student unions, service organisations, trade unions, and artistic organisations. They commonly use banners, posters, booklets, billboards with random parades of *theyyam* icons, and billboards. The use of *theyyam* live and stuffed enhances the visual appeal of films and music videos.

When their artists were invited to perform *theyyam* on formal, celebrated days like Independence and Republic days in the nation's capital, *theyyam* became known to the general public(Dasan). The national headquarters held cultural fests and Asiad, two massive

international events that marked the auspicious beginnings of *theyyam* performances. The performer loses control over their own cultural expressions in these decontextualized performances. All of these factors—space, time, sequence, duration—are managed externally. Consequently, a ritual that is particular to a community becomes an object whose spectacular display serves only to appease the voyeuristic eyes of the nation's elite.

Theyyam is a ritual when it performs in *kavu*, and a public *theyyam* performance lack all of life, faith, myth, and sacred. It just turns into a *theyyam* manifestation. When *theyyam* is performed in processions, cultural events, and advertising campaigns around Kerala, it frequently falls short of capturing the essence of the art form. There are strong objections to these kinds of public performances.

After weeks of fasting and preparation, most *theyyam* in North Malabar become entwined with *kavu*, establishing control over an entire area. To address authenticity concerns related to the broader theme, framing it as a performance and issuing a performance-style warning to the audience can help mitigate potential issues. There have been numerous changes from *theyyam*'s day to the present. From tools, face writing, clothes, and other items used in *theyyam* to, *kavu* becomes temples, and communities are adopting mythology that transcends their own is matters. Globalisation and brahmanization are two factors that have played a role in these transformations and it is the performers' duty to educate the people about the differences between *theyyam* performed in public and what is traditionally done in North Malabar.

Findings and analysis

Theyyam is a ceremonial worship practise that was originally devoted to gods, local deities, and ancestor spirits. It is an essential component of communities' devotions and belief systems in Northern Kerala. The ritual entails a close relationship with the divine, with the performer—typically a member of a lower caste—becoming the god or spirit being called upon. Offerings, prayers, and trance-like performances are all part of the rites, which are thought to help people communicate directly with the divine and human realms. The local community is actively involved in and contributes to the *theyyam* ritual. People frequently engage with the performer who represents the deity in order to ask for favours, direction, or answers to their difficulties.

Theyyam are usually performed in public as a kind of cultural entertainment, mainly for visitors, during festivals, or other events. The shows are put up to highlight Kerala's strong artistic traditions and rich cultural legacy. The audience is primarily meant to be entertained

by the performances in public spaces. They are designed and executed in a way that draws in onlookers with vibrant costumes, intricate makeup, and exuberant dancing moves. Viewers may observe the artistic components without necessarily participating in the more profoundly ritualistic or spiritual elements. While Theyyam's initial ritualistic framework served religious and spiritual aims, its primary goals in public performances are entertainment and cultural preservation. In public performances, the audience watches and takes in the show; in the original ritual, on the other hand, members of the community actively engage and strive for a spiritual connection. In the original ritualistic environment, when the performance is central to the community's religious practises and beliefs, the spiritual and religious importance is significantly deeper. The ritualistic theyyam frequently contains certain symbolic aspects and nuances that carry religious importance, separate from those used in public performances, even though both contexts entail elaborate costumes and makeup.

Conclusion

In the age of globalization, cultures are increasingly interconnected, leading to the blending and borrowing of diverse folklore elements. While this exchange can be enriching, it also raises concerns about the preservation of authentic traditions. As folklore becomes more accessible to a global audience, there is a growing need to ensure that its essence and cultural significance are not lost or distorted. It is crucial to be mindful of the origins, meanings, and cultural contexts of folklore when sharing it in the digital realm.

Moreover, the commercialization of folklore has become a prevalent issue. In an era where folklore can be easily commodified and monetized, there is a risk of diluting its authenticity for the sake of profit. This can lead to the exploitation of cultural traditions and the creation of inauthentic representations that cater to mass consumption. To address these challenges, it is essential to value and respect the integrity of folklore. Collaborative efforts between communities, scholars, and digital platforms can play a crucial role in preserving and promoting authentic folklore. By engaging in respectful dialogue, seeking informed consent, and providing proper attribution, we can ensure that folklore continues to thrive while maintaining its cultural authenticity.

Authenticity debates were triggered by the shift of *theyyam* from private village rituals to public spectacles in urban areas. Some contend that maintaining traditional aesthetics and ceremonial organisation preserves its essential qualities. Others draw attention to its reinvention using altered settings, justifications, and aesthetics.

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