

# Theyyam as a Ritualistic Catharsis: Cultural Trauma, Collective Memory, and Socio-Religious Subversion in Kerala

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## Abstract

This paper examines the folk ritual of Theyyam in Kerala as a site of collective trauma, cultural memory, and social protest. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives—including anthropology, psychoanalysis, trauma studies, and postcolonial theory—this study argues that Theyyam functions as a cathartic and therapeutic medium for historically marginalized lower-caste communities in Kerala. The performance of Theyyam not only reenacts past injustices but also allows for a temporary inversion of social hierarchy, thereby enabling the oppressed to embody divine agency. This study explores how the ritual serves as a socio-political critique, a site of communal healing, and a mechanism for intergenerational trauma processing. By integrating insights from Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory, Johan Galtung’s structural violence framework, and Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of social capital, this paper situates Theyyam within the broader discourse of cultural resistance and resilience.

**Keywords:** Theyyam, Ritual Performance, Collective Trauma, Cultural Resistance, Caste System, Kerala, Intergenerational Trauma, Social Catharsis, Structural Violence, Cultural Memory.

Art and culture are deeply intertwined, shaping social structures and human behavior. Culture, as defined by James Spradley, is “the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior” (Spradley, 1979). It is both dynamic and evolving, constantly influenced by historical, political, and social forces. In Kerala, a state known for

its rich artistic and ritualistic traditions, Theyyam emerges as a unique cultural expression that preserves and articulates the historical consciousness of marginalized communities.

Theyyam, primarily performed in the North Malabar region of Kerala, is a ritualistic dance-drama that blends elements of performance, mythology, and spirituality. Rooted in the socio-religious traditions of the 12th century under the patronage of the Kolathiri rulers, Theyyam serves as both a religious act and a form of social commentary. Unlike temple-based Brahminical rituals, which reinforce caste hierarchies, Theyyam is performed by individuals from historically oppressed castes, momentarily subverting rigid social structures. This paper seeks to explore Theyyam as a form of cultural resistance and psychological healing, analyzing its function in articulating historical grievances, enabling cathartic release, and reinforcing communal solidarity.

### **Theyyam as a Cultural and Ritual Performance**

Theyyam, derived from the word Theivam (meaning “God”), represents a fusion of indigenous Dravidian traditions and later Aryan influences. The ritual is performed in Kavus (sacred groves) rather than Brahminical temples, emphasizing its non-Vedic roots. The performance involves elaborate costumes, intricate face painting, and dramatic movements, culminating in a trance state in which the performer is believed to be possessed by the deity. This divine possession is central to Theyyam’s ritualistic significance, transforming the performer into a living god before the audience.

The performance structure of Theyyam includes Thottam Pattukal (invocatory songs), which recount mythological narratives, often highlighting themes of oppression and resistance. These songs serve as oral histories, preserving the struggles and resilience of marginalized communities. The ritual’s association with agrarian practices and fertility cults further underscores its deep connection to the socio-economic realities of lower-caste groups (Freeman, 1999). Unlike the rigid Brahminical temple system, where deities are permanently

enshrined, Theyyam allows divine agency to be temporarily embodied by individuals from the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy, creating a radical space for social inversion.

### **Theyyam, Trauma, and Catharsis**

Theyyam functions as a medium for the expression and processing of collective trauma. Trauma, as Bessel van der Kolk (2014) asserts, is not merely a psychological wound but one that is encoded in the body, necessitating physical enactment for healing. Theyyam, with its intense physicality, rhythmic drumming, and fire-walking rituals, provides a somatic experience that aids in trauma processing. The trance state achieved by performers aligns with what Peter Levine (1997) describes as pendulation—a process of moving in and out of traumatic memories, allowing for gradual emotional release.

The performative aspects of Theyyam—its dramatic expressions, rapid movements, and symbolic gestures—act as mechanisms for catharsis. Victor Turner's (1969) concept of ritual liminality explains how Theyyam momentarily suspends social hierarchies, allowing the performer, who belongs to an oppressed community, to embody divine power. This temporary status inversion not only offers psychological relief but also reinforces the collective identity of marginalized groups.

### **Theyyam and Structural Violence**

The caste system in Kerala, historically among the most rigid in India, institutionalized systemic violence against lower castes, including untouchability, forced labor, and social exclusion. Johan Galtung (1969) defines structural violence as oppression embedded within social structures, preventing individuals from meeting their basic needs. Kerala's caste hierarchy functioned as a form of structural violence that deprived lower castes of economic mobility and human dignity. Theyyam, by contrast, disrupts this structure by providing an alternative space where marginalized voices can be heard. Many ThottamPattukal directly challenge caste oppression, recounting stories of divine justice and

retribution against upper-caste atrocities. In particular, PottanTheyyam, which reenacts a debate between a Pulayan (a lower-caste individual) and the philosopher Shankaracharya, symbolizes the defiance of caste-based discrimination and the assertion of human equality.

### **The Therapeutic Potential of Theyyam**

Beyond its socio-political significance, Theyyam serves as a therapeutic ritual that fosters collective healing. Dominick LaCapra (2001) argues that trauma is not merely an individual affliction but a collective experience that necessitates communal expression and recognition. Theyyam achieves this by creating a shared space for witnessing and processing historical injustices. The ritual's rhythmic elements, communal participation, and trance-induced states parallel contemporary trauma therapies that emphasize non-verbal expression. Dance therapy, for instance, recognizes the healing potential of movement in regulating emotions and restoring psychological balance (Monteiro & Wall, 2011). By allowing lower-caste performers to embody divine power and receive reverence from their communities, Theyyam functions as a site of empowerment and resilience.

### **Conclusion**

Theyyam is more than a religious performance; it is a cultural assertion, a psychological release, and a socio-political act. By allowing historically marginalized communities to embody divine agency, Theyyam subverts hierarchical structures and provides a medium for articulating collective trauma. Through an interdisciplinary analysis integrating trauma studies, anthropology, and religious studies, this paper highlights the ritual's enduring significance in contemporary Kerala.

In an era where caste-based discrimination persists in subtle forms, Theyyam remains a powerful testament to the resilience of Kerala's lower-caste communities. Recognizing its therapeutic and socio-political dimensions not only deepens our understanding of cultural

performance but also underscores the importance of indigenous healing traditions in addressing historical trauma.

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