



# In Theyyam, The Aesthetics Of Music And Movements Of The Body Are Explored.

Krishnakumar Chandramohan\*1,

\* MPA Theatre student, Central University of Punjab, India

## Abstract

The present study explores the role of Music and its aesthetic aspect in the body movements of the Theyyam ritual dance performance. The study emphasises the physical actions and aesthetic display of the performer in the light of the music he/she is performing, along with the Theyyam dance tradition of Kerala. The research method used is mostly empirical with a qualitative approach. Based on the above set objectives, the intrinsic relationship between Theyyam music and physical movement, as well as the aesthetic aspect, is studied. In this context, music and physical movement are considered together and as essential to each other. The Theyyam environment is smoothened with music and physical movement, and the cultural heritage is preserved.

Aesthetics, Ritual Performance, Body Language, Heritage, Theyyam, and Music are the key words.

## Introduction

Theyyam is believed to be a ritualistic ceremony practised by the people of different communities. It is a worship practice that devotees use to gain the gods' blessings. It's a ritual that is performed by the followers for the blessing of the gods. Theyyam is being practised in the northern Malabar region of Kerala, namely, Kasaragod, Kozhikode, and Kannur, and is still being practised today. (Basa).

In short, Theyyam is a traditional dance ceremony of Kerala. Theyyam is a divinity and has spiritual connotations, and is derived from the Malayalam word Deivam, which means God. The tradition of Theyyam is also linked to the community from misfortune and occurs in sacred groves (kavu), temples, and courtyards between October and May (Thulam and Edavam). (Shaishnarikutty)

It is thought to be around 1500 years old and has strong ties to ancestor worship and nature worship. And local God worship, establishing a splendid cultural identity in North Kerala. There are about 300-400 types of Theyyam practised in different regions, and some variations according to the region and tradition. Each kavu is associated with its own Theyyams, and each God with its own legend, which affects the rites to be carried out in the kavu. (Karippath).

This study has brought to light the aesthetics of music and body movement in the traditional Theyyam performances and the role of the body movement in creating the dynamic energy of the Theyyam artist.

## Literature Review

Theyyam is one of the significant ritual performance traditions of North Kerala. It is seen as a ritual art form involving music, dance, body movements, facial makeup, rituals, spiritual beliefs and social identities. Theyyam has been studied in several ways, such as socially, culturally, religiously, ritually and performatively. Many scholars have explored, in particular, the caste identity, ritual transformation, music, body performance and elements of social resistance found in Theyyam traditions.

Aditya Mohanan's *Sounds from a Silenced Divinity* studies how music plays a role in the caste relationship of Theyyam. According to him, Theyyam is a religious ritual of the Dalit communities. It is a study which compares and contrasts Theyyam vādyam (ritual music) and upper-caste temple musical traditions using an ethnomusicological approach. It emphasizes the importance of music as a means of self-expression of social identity, authority and culture. (Mohanam).

Theyyam is also discussed in terms of rituals and the way the transformation into the Divine by Mohanan is done. He stresses that a change in the performer's spirit takes place when rhythms, chanting and body movements are incorporated in percussion. The research also theorises Theyyam as a counter-hegemonic expression of ritualism as a response to caste oppression.

In *Theyyam as a Ritualistic Catharsis: Cultural Trauma, Collective Memory, and Socio-Religious Subversion in Kerala*, Mekhana A. R. explores the socio-religious subversive aspects of Theyyam as a collective healing ritual. The research method followed is anthropological analysis, trauma theory and post-colonial studies for the analysis of Theyyam. According to the study, Theyyam is a ritual area, where the lower castes can live their life through divine agency. (Mekhana).

The study elucidates how Theyyam's rhythmic drumming, trance states, fire rituals and dramatic enactment of body movements evoke a cathartic experience. The presentation of body movements, gestures and ritualistic practices as the means of expressing collective memory and historical trauma.

Bindu Rajendren writes on Theyyam and performative identity and cultural representation in the thesis *Representing Identities through Theyyam Ritual and Performative Practices*. The researcher views Theyyam as a ritual dancing tradition and explores the theme of how caste, community and national identity are conveyed in Theyyam.

N. Ramachandran, *Pothan Theyyam: Nattar Valipadu Kuritha Katturaikal*. This is a comprehensive study of an important form of traditional worship of the people of Kerala. The author describes the nature of Theyyam as a significant aspect of the folk worship of Kerala and the fact that it is deeply embedded in the social and religious lives of the people of the area. From the studies contained in this volume, it can be concluded that the theyyam ceremonies combine performing arts, mythology and devotion, and that the theyyam is a ritualistic theatre performance, which is an expression of Malabar history and culture. (Ramachandran).

*The World of Theyyam: A Study of Ritual Art Form of North Kerala*. R.C. Karippath. This article helps to clarify different aspects of the art form called theyyam. It highlights themes of the performance arena where theyyam is played, and how it is being practised today. It also provides an understanding of the social background of the theyyam players, the performance style and the different kinds of theyyam. The history of theyyam and the theatrical aspect of it is also discussed. It is a must-have document for gaining insight into the social and cultural context, performance practice and ritual of theyyam. (Karippath).

The psychological crime thriller novel *Shijo Abraham* is a beautiful amalgamation of folklore, ritual, and performance arts. It is set in the context of the novel, and charts the series of mysterious events that occur throughout the theyyam ceremony. The story tells of faith, fear, social traditions, and people's psychology. Moreover, the novel uncovers the complex relationships and intersections between cultural beliefs and the

Theyyam ritual. As such, this work provides an important insight into the cultural and social aspects of theyyam. (Abraham).

Theyyam, a Traditional Art Form of Kerala: Continuity & Change, V.P. Vishnu Prasad. This study looks into the genesis, cultural importance and evolution of theyyam (art form) of the northern Malabar part of Kerala. Theyyam is a Hindu ritual that combines aspects of dance, music, elaborate dress, and divine possession. In addition, the study points out that this art tradition has been practised primarily by lower castes. The research also highlights that the ritualistic nature of theyyam is under threat in the modern world, as it is sometimes converted into stage shows for tourism due to the effects of globalisation and commercialisation. This study highlights the contemporary issues faced by the theyyam art tradition. (Vishnu Prasad).

N.R. Rhul and Banita Behera, The article's existing analysis focuses on Thira (Theyyattam) from the perspectives of anthropology and heritage studies. It examines the cultural origins, historical development, and preservation of the art form. Thira, or Theyyattam, is an ongoing traditional art form that combines ritual spirit possession, dance, music, and colourful costumes. It is accompanied by ritual enactments to invoke Bhagavathi and Muthappan. These events take place on the festivals of the Malayan and Vannan communities in the temple. In addition, these rituals become cultural activities which help unite tribal and non-tribal communities. Thus, the Thira art form is a tradition that remains alive to this day, much influenced by social and religious life. (Behera).

All previous studies have shown that Theyyam is a rich art form that includes music, body movements, rituals, social memory, caste identity, and symbolic performance. However, there is limited research on the role of music and body movements in Theyyam performance in generating aesthetic meaning. Hence, the present study examines the relationship between Aesthetics in the context of music, body movement, and symbolic performance practices of Theyyam.

### **Research Methodology**

This study is based on empirical research. It is grounded in direct fieldwork conducted at the sites of Theyyam performances, personal experience, and participant observation. A qualitative research method, cultural context, music, and theatrical aspects of Theyyam as a traditional ritual-performing art.

Primary data were collected through fieldwork; interviews with Theyyam performers, priests, musicians, and audience members; participant observation; and photographic and video documentation of performance events. These methods provided the researcher with an in-depth understanding of Theyyam.

The secondary data sources include books, journal articles, academic publications and research papers on Theyyam.

This research methodology analyses the aesthetic elements of Theyyam based on its music, body movements, and symbolic performance practices.

### **The Music of Theyyam**

Music plays a very important role in the performance of Theyyam. In this art, music is a life-giving force, holding the ritual together from beginning to end. Music assists in the ritual proceedings in every stage of the performance and imparts strength and intensity to it. Moreover, music plays a vital role in creating an auspicious atmosphere for Theyyam and in bringing out its spiritual connotations.

Music, as an integral part of Theyyam, is used to highlight the artist's physical gestures, emotional expressions and devotional intensity. The resulting beauty and emotional impact of the show are therefore greatly enhanced. Songs called "Thottam Pattu" are an important part of advancing the ritual, rich in rhythm and meter and passed down orally from one generation to the next.

Music is also a major element in building up ritual momentum. Music, dance, and ritual play together in Theyyam, complementing each other and enhancing the overall impact and aesthetic value of the experience. The conceits of rhythm, its movement and metrics have a deep impact on determining the physical movement of the artist and vitalising them.

A traditional musical instrument is the primary means of maintaining traditional cultural heritage in Kerala. Many instruments used in Theyyam have been continuously passed down from one generation to another to date. Fieldwork, interviews and participatory experiences were used to explore the characteristics of the musical instruments used in the Theyyam performance.

### **Musical Instruments**

These are the different types of instruments used in Theyyam rituals, with the Chenda, Kuzhal, Perumparai, Sallari, Kulampukkuzhal, Shankh (conch), and Veeramathalam standing out as the foremost. They are significant tools that help to set the tone on the ritual level of spirit and aesthetics. The sounds of the percussion instruments in particular add to the heroic spirit, emotional intensity and devotional fervour of the Theyyam performance.

Music is crucial in these rites, and since they are played for long stretches of time, there is a prominent place for percussion instruments. The pace of the music, as well as how it is played, is adjusted to fit the context, the nature of the ritual and the events as they unfold. The musical tradition of Theyyam has been passed down mainly orally from one generation to the next. Older musicians pass on their ancient songs and musical skills to the younger generation.

### **The Importance and Contribution of Musical Instruments**

Traditional songs have been sung for a long time, but in the present, they can be performed with shorter time frames and adapted to the situation and performance space. Hence, some songs of Theyyam are being performed in a shorter duration. However, their traditional separateness and ritual uses are still maintained.

These musical instruments are an integral part of the Theyyam art form and articulate its very essence. They are instruments used to make the art come alive. The function of music is to evoke a religious feeling and experience in the audience, and musical instruments play an important role in this. The theme of the musical "Kuzhal" is of paramount significance in the ritual's initiation process and its connotations. The musicality of the Kuzhal prepares the ritual participants and the audience.

Traditional musical instruments work seamlessly together to create the full musical ambience of the ritual session. In particular, the drum ensemble, known as Chenda Melam, creates the musical atmosphere for the ritual, intensifying the event's energy. Music and musical instruments are the means by which the Theyyam artist's physical movements, divine manifestations and emotional expression are structured and given their life and vitality.

Moreover, music is important in the ritual to attract the audience's attention and prevent boredom. The music is continuous, and the rhythmic synchronicity with it sustains the ritual's spiritual mood. In this sense, musical instruments play a crucial role in maintaining the tradition of the art of Theyyam and its unique cultural identity.

Nowadays, musical instruments are getting used increasingly, but kakkoth kavu traditional instruments are still being used in the old style and with their own qualities in the Theyyam ritual performance.

They endure with their traditional identity intact, having not been entirely supplanted by new forms of fusion music. Studies and observations indicate that this tradition of music and instrumentation is meticulously taught to the younger generation and faithfully maintained by generations of instrumentalists.

Therefore, music and musical instruments play a crucial role in driving the Theyyam ritual forward and in preparing both the performers and the spectators for a spiritual experience.

### **The Importance of Body Movement**

Body movements occupy a pivotal position in Theyyam. They serve as the vitalising medium that breathes life into the entire artistic expression of Theyyam. The movements not only reflect the aesthetics of ritual, dance and visual composition, but also reveal the many profound meanings of the ritual for the viewers.

Every step, hand gesture, and physical motion in a Theyyam performance is symbolic and significant. In sum, these aspects convey the artistry and the beauty of Theyyam. The variety of emotions, including valour, fury, serenity and grace, is expressed physically.

Through this medium, a sense of devotion and a spiritual experience are evoked within the audience. The artist's movement is also crucial to his metamorphosis into a divine being. Each motion, from head to toe, has a certain meaning and emotion attached to it. The shape and movement of the body, the hand movements and facial expressions work together to form the entire visual mosaic of Theyyam.

Furthermore, the body's movements can stir the audience's aesthetic sensibilities and enrich the performance's emotional impact. Even the most subtle of movements reinforces the artist's physical aesthetic expression. When used in synchrony with the music, they amplify and emphasise the music.

The physical manifestation of Theyyam is an integral aspect of the narration of the story and of ritual concepts. Theyyam's strength, flexibility, gestures, and choreographic patterns all contribute to the art's overall aesthetic. The movements of the body are thus seen as an essence and a leitmotif of the art itself. In the art of Theyyam, the body serves as the life-giving instrument that animates the overall expression of the art form. These movements demonstrate the beauty of ritual, dance, and visual composition, and also show the depth of the messages ritual conveys to the viewer.

The hand gestures, each step, each movement of Theyyam carry special meanings and significance. All of these exhibit the beauty and artistic finesse of Theyyam. In particular, there are distinct emotions in the body's activity: "valour", "furious", "serene" and "grace". The medium conveys a feeling of devotion and spiritual feeling to the audience.

The artistic movement is also of great importance in the artist's metamorphosis into a divine being. Each movement has its own message and feeling, from head to toe. The whole movement of the Theyyam is curved, flexible and involves hand movements and facial expressions.

Furthermore, whole-body movement strongly influences how the audience values the performance and how it evokes emotion. Not even the most sensitive of actions carries the artist's body's artistic expression. In addition to music, physical movements have been incorporated to enhance the performance's intensity and impact.

### **The Connection and Aesthetics of Music in Body Movements**

The body movements are a key means of communicating the narrative pattern and ritual ideas of Theyyam. Theyyam's art is an integrated whole in which the strength, flexibility, gestures, and movement patterns of the body combine with the overall artistic aesthetics. Thus, the overall movement of the body is considered an essential and intrinsic element of the art of Theyyam.

The music and body movement are considered an interlocked entity in the Theyyam art. The two together create the total art performance and spiritual atmosphere of the Theyyam ritual. The three elements of music, body movement and ritual mutually support each other and help maintain continuity and vitality of the performance.

Music and physical actions are crucial elements in establishing a spirit of devotion and in symbolising divine feelings. The rhythmic and templatc aspects of the music are perfectly in sync with the artist's body movements during Theyyam. The rhythmic variants and the playing of instruments such as Chenda, Parai and Kurumkuzhal accompany the artist.

The faster the music goes, the more intense the bodily movements and the faster the dance. In contrast, during calm music, gentle, fluid movements emerge. The physical dynamics, including spinning, swaying, leaping, jumping and fire-dancing, all work in harmony with the musical rhythm to create a unified aesthetic.

Music is important for energising the body and for dance. Rhythm, tempo and sound are the main agents that lead to the transformation of the performer, an ordinary human being, into a divine being, through the ritualistic state of the music. Music is an essential "cue" or motivating element that gives power and vigour to the artist's physical motions.

### **Aesthetic**

The Theyyam style is closely associated with the body's movement and the physical energy involved, and it originates in nature. The different parts of the body (eyes, hands and legs) move in harmony with the music, reflecting a spiritual aesthetic and artistic elegance.

Theyyam Music is not just background noise; it's a powerful aesthetic element that bridges the gap between divine consciousness, spiritual atmosphere, and artistic splendour. In addition, the traditional aesthetics of Theyyam are communicated to the audience through costumes, make-up, ritualistic props, and the stage setting (with music). In this way, music and the body come together, bringing to life the spiritual, artistic, and aesthetic aspects of the art of Theyyam.

### **Conclusion**

In the art of Theyyam, music and bodily movements are perceived as fundamental elements that are inextricably intertwined. These two aspects give life to the ritualistic, artistic and spiritual aspects of Theyyam. The music has a rhythmic quality, and the dynamics of the bodies' movement express the special aesthetic sensibility of Theyyam.

Body language and music are important artistic idioms in which the Theyyam ritual is woven. Harmony with the music allows bodily expressions, emotions, hand gestures, and physical movements to convey rich artistic nuances and spiritual meanings to audiences. These two elements, combined, give devotees and viewers a powerful spiritual and aesthetic experience.

Besides, the rhythmic sound production and body movements add to the artistic value of the Theyyam ritual and also preserve its traditional identity. Theyyam is not only a ritualistic activity but also an important art form that represents Kerala's traditional art culture, social memory, and cultural identity.

Therefore, Theyyam is a traditional body-based spiritual art; music and body movements are combined to enhance its artistic value, and it is passed on from generation to generation.

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