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of Theyyam**

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ABSTRACT

Theyyam is a colloquial expression which means God, which has fascinating stories of goddesses and gods from Indian mythology. The major concern of this Theyyam festival is to create divine power and find out the solution for the problems faced by the specific community. Theyyam is performed by lower class people in southern part of India, Kerala state. The proposed research paper tries to re-examine the space, body and design in a wider perspective. The research paper attempts to interrogate the interrelationship between large leaps of space and the body from the vantage point of theatre design in an effort to define culturally the body in performance and the performance space. How Theyyam had been undergone with multiple faces in terms of space and design? How the socio-political changes affected Theyyam performance? Theyyam has always been a vigorous action and used as a weapon of the oppressed to fight against injustice that they face every single day from the society. Theyyam performance take place in community shrines and groves in different part of the village where performer have to stay away from family atmosphere and develop a heightened level of concentration which starts from the private place and slowly move to the public sphere. The most significant aspects of the performance is to see the 'live- god' solve the issues of specific community through the interaction with devotees. The human-god converse, bless and show his gratitude to the devotees. This is my attempt to understand the process of defining and consecrating the space and its unequivocal connection with the process of making image in the theatre space, the body in performance which has a language of theatre and which is politicized evokes space and time consciousness in a multiplicity of ways.

Keywords: Space, Ritual, Community, Transformation, Body

Introduction

The proposed research paper attempts to examine a major ritual tradition, “Theyyam” of north Kerala, South Western India. Theyyam is a colloquial expression which means “God”. The god referred to may be male or female spirits, historical figure, ancestors, and other deities associated directly or indirectly to the Hindu Gods Siva and Vishnu. The major purpose of this festival is to generate a divine power and to seek resolution to solve the crisis and issues by personifying the incarnation of god through a profound transformation process. The performer become ‘live gods’ throughout the process. Theyyam is a sacred belief and practice of the people of the specific community which is centered on the cultural proposition of divine possessions. Theyyam is performed at the time of harvest which is during the month of October to April in both private and community shrines and locations throughout the northern part of Kerala and often serves as the most important event in the ritual calendar for many communities.

One of the major feature of Theyyam performance is a peculiar kind of Dance [attam] of the deity by male performers. Theyyam performers are belongs to lower caste family, such as Peruvannan, Thiyan, Malayan, Vannan, etc. Most of the performers does not have any other job, at times, few of them works in banks, schools, tailoring, etc. Each community has their own rights to perform a specific Theyyam. Theyyam performers are generally male members of lower caste family, which is inherited. ‘Performers wear elaborate costume and make-up, and huge headgears. At the end of the performance, he is approached by devotees who ask for favors, make promises, and receive blessings. Theyyam performance is used with extra ordinary decorative headdresses, burning torches, movements, intensifying the feet in the air, speech, and spectacular mix of indigenous music, drumming, dances, rituals and rites throughout the performance.

Theyyam is a form of worship, which includes, costumes, ornaments, huge headgears, a particular dance movements, symbols, texts, connotations, formulas and rituals. There are many forms of Theyyams, Theechamundi, Vishnu Murthy, Ottakkolam, Pottan, Gulikan, Tai Paradevata etc. Theyyam is performed very imaginatively through numerous rituals and rites which is developed through various styles folk traditional forms. Theyyam explored as part of cult and emerged through the respects of natural and super natural elements. Theyyam started in ancient times as part of the culture and religious belief where people worshiped, animals, trees, serpents, ancestors, mother goddess, etc.

Sometimes, the performance transcend beyond our imagination. The major socio-political aspects of Theyyam is, it gives a voice for the oppressed people from the lower caste to fight against injustice which happens in the society since apartheid /caste system was very strong in Kerala. Theyyam deals with many social-political and cultural aspects beyond the sacred belief. Theyyam performance includes not only gods and goddesses but also, animals, ancestors, warrior heroes, spirits and ghosts. The day of Theyyam, the performer is the divine and supreme authority, then the performer can talk

about the injustice and against caste system exacted on them by the higher caste people. This is the day everyone follows the God-performer. Thus the Theyyam Festival served as sort of a social instrument, bringing people together of all classes through religious participation. Today, even though the social degradation associated with belonging to the low caste has been eliminated, the art form itself has remained under the single custodianship of these traditional families and it is through descendants of those communities that this ritual performance is practiced and kept alive. There are many interrogations to be cleared for myself that, is there any possibility to restructure and find out a re-exhibition value for this performing ritual art form for today? What can we encourage to theatre from the theatrical elements of Theyyam? How the design and devices can help contemporary theatre practice?

Practice of Space with Multiple Reality

Now days, Theyyam performance has been vanishing from the society, because the ecological breakdown and economic crisis that they face in daily life. The changes, which are manifest in Theyyam performance is directly marked to the socio-cultural, economic and political changes. It really touched Theyyam performance and performers also. It affected them in a multiple ways. First of all Theyyam was performed in flora, which is known as Kavu. This space has its own shape and size which is scientifically related to the time and space. This is the space where performer can find out the possibilities to enhance his concentration in a heightened level. Now Kavu/grove had undergone a kind of spatial change. Some kavus were transitioned into temples, and building. Kavus also were not opened to all people. Now most of the kavus turned as temples which is directly connected to the political contest of province.

Now there is no money and vegetation for the Theyyam performer to practice the ritual and also the basic question is survival and existence of a human being. Theyyam artists are facing a lot of problem to sustain the ritual form and also to survive every day. The existence of Theyyam and the performers are seriously threatened by the process of alteration of Technology and commercialization of life in the contemporary age and the accompanying changes in socio-political and economic structure. Gradually Theyyam has been used for few public occasions and taken into the market. People started making the buildings and restructured and constructed all the groves into business arrangement.

The arrival of electricity and lights had been changed the space and time of the performance again. Before they were using oil lamps and made fire frames to perform. Today, the situation has completely altered. The potential of the electric light to transform night into day altered the mood derived from the natural eco-friendly spaces that before existed. It is very difficult for Theyyam performer to

perform out of the grove where there is no greenery, they collectively believe that it can be possible inside of a shrine or grove. Theyyam rituals demands various discipline of rites which has been performed in a particular order, to gain the power of god.

The Theyyam movements and voice has to take on an exaggerated level because a simple raising of arms, a scream and the utterances will be closer to the human and less godlike. The Theyyam therefore resorts to a high decibel chant and invocation, orchestrating his voice and tenor at a much higher level—with a bloodcurdling quivering in the voice. The voice must rise higher a pitch higher than the voice of the believer who stands before him and be distinctive too. The immediate atmosphere of the *kaavu* has a major function in influencing and creating a „mood“ of worship.

Design and Symbols

Symbols and Design in Theyyam performance, represents many things at the same time. It also give multi-dimensional quality and multiple meanings to the devotees and also represent the stories of Theyyam performance through Painting the body, evolving the holistic/sacred space from the public sphere, deeper awareness of the body, Mantras/vocalizations and finding a new-variables of the narratives, magnification of the body in space, body arbitrating the natural forces by accommodating by its simplified forms as an ornamentation [like fire, water, trees and animals], and conceptualizing various natural elements in terms of invoking the physical content of the theme. Theyyam performers drives beyond the imagination techniques of time and space, imageries and its variables are playing the role of moral/intellectual duties in the social life of the people, metaphors and its variables in performance and its social existence are defined by the others and both precedes one another. These symbols work as communication between Theyyam performer and devotees. It has a powerful quality to represent that particular culture and also gives an important characteristics of religious practice. Theyyam performance conceptualize various elements in terms of invoking the physical content of the theme, theatrical devices in acting, extreme imagination techniques of time and space, symbolism as a functional factor, god-human duality playing, imageries and its features are playing the role of moral duties in the social life of the common people.

It is fascinating that besides the stories of goddesses and gods from the mythology, the Theyyam dancers also enact stories of local heroes and heroines who have been worshiped. Few Theyyams are played early in the morning around 3 to 4 am. The whole community starts preparing for the performance the entire day like collecting wood, making the costumes, ornaments, and creating the space. This is the most inventive way to acknowledge the heroes of the community and to celebrate history through the arts. In Theyyam performance two stories run parallel, one part is about god and other part is all about the heroes of the specific community. Performers also used the vocalization, costumes and body painting to complete the story. Performer sit inside of a specific closed room for few days

by fasting and try to avoid public conversation and also avoid family members, then slowly get into the transformation by listening to the drum beat. Performers go through a kind ritualistic performances and mental and physical transformation of turning into gods.

Body and Space

The research paper attempts to interrogate the interrelationship between large leaps of space and the body from the vantage point of theatre design in an effort to define culturally the body in performance and the performance space. Theyyam performance space can be transformed and articulated with the basic design and its content. I am looking at the possibilities of the form with various perspectives and dimensions which can be perceived through theatre practice. They have number of rituals to invite the power of the god to the performer's body. All aspects of theatre performance is deeply involved in Theyyam performance such as actor, make-up, costume, text, music, costume, lights, set, properties, ornaments and audience.

The full involvement of performer's body and mind is very important in Theyyam performer, So that they are preparing and goes under long time fasting and depart from the worldly concern things. Sometime, it's a kind torture for Theyyam performer since they are asked to jump to the fire. Fire is an essential ingredient in most of the Theyyam. Theyyam are constantly surrounded by burning coals scattered on the ground. The important of defining and consecrating the space and its unequivocal /clear connection with the process of making image in the theatre space, the body in performance which has a language of theatre and which is politicized evokes space and time consciousness in a multiplicity of ways. Few Theyyams are there where performer is forcefully thrown into the fire, some time he sits, jump and rest on the flame. As one young Theyyam performer shared with me that most of the time there body tingles but they have to jump then devotees will push them to the fire. He continued to say that ultimately it's a human body, we get badly hurt, but we will do it for the community preservation, it's the belief of the people and also he said that it's an internalization process for them. Theyyam is not only a psychological function but also a physical force. It's an equal participation and an interactive ritual process where all devotees and the performers are taking equal part. Theyyam is a way of sharing and conversing the social issues with the whole community and finding solution by the public itself. Ultimately it is very much transparent to the entire community. Theyyam and its contents and their relations to one another demarcate a universal value and is also stand beyond codified temporal units. Here it follows various dimensions and categorizations of observing at the form in a modern understanding as part of my research.

Preparations

Theyyam costumes are made by coconut leaf, shells, and cotton cloth

It takes artists between 11 to 36 hours to create each costume with bamboo and textile - silver decorations etc. The face painting and preparations on the performance day is 4 to 5 hours. The headgears are of different types, some are more than 22 feet high. Actually the belief is that the costumes and painted mask-like makeup is the “body” of Theyyam and that the performer is like a vehicle that carries it and the dance. So once they get into the costume they are in contact with the God. I would like to give you a brief idea about three important Theyyam which is different from each other in terms text, make up, costume, and vocalization, etc.

There are many make-up design categories. Each make up got its own fundamental rules which cannot be violated. At times, the line, color, patterns, shape of the make-up is decided by the permanent/ fixed mood of each Theyyam. There are more than thirty basic make up patters which is specified to the eye brow, cheeks, forehead and lips. Make-up has a major role in helping the performer to get into the alteration process and also begin turning his mind from peripheral anxieties towards the deity. During the make –up and costuming time, performer supposed to listen to the vocal part of Theyyam and achieve the sacred syllables connected with the god. They make the paste of rice powder and apply to the entire body to protect themselves from the fire. Each single shift of the ritual, performer will actually concentrate and utter the mantras /chants and literally to internalize the power of god. There are few mantras which he is only uttered by the performer at the time of costuming to help him to invite the god into his body.

Theyyam represented by that costume and that contact will not change and throughout the dance, they will remain in the same attitude. The exact point of change happens at the point of *mukhadarshanam* (seeing the face). This is when the headdress is placed on the artist in front of the altar, and he is shown a mirror. When the human artist looks into the mirror he no longer sees himself. He sees a divine being and from that point he turns into that Being. The end of the tottam or utterance of mantras, the rhythm of Chenda become increasingly louder (percussion instrument) and faster, then the performer starts shaking his whole body. Theyyam is intensely physical in nature and performer develops a mental energy as well. Theyyam performance never been stagnant, it always changes, moves and a developing process. The body experiences through a ritualization process where the individual body become a social body and individual consciousness become the collective Unconsciousness. As a performer mentioned it to me that, it’s always been a self-conscious process and expand the communication between human-god and the devotees.

I would like to talk about three particular Theyyam, named Pottan Theyyam, Uchitta and Vishnumurthy Theyyam. How Theyyam become a symbolic action of the culture, and also openly criticize the caste system in India, especially in Kerala state. I can see the similarities in text, movements, rituals, jumping and sitting in fire, etc. As I mentioned it above, most of Theyyam sits on the flame, jump into it and they burn their entire body, even though they apply rice powder paste on their body. All Theyyam wear the costumes which is made with Coconut leaves and bamboo sticks. Still it burns.

The Legend of Vishnumurthy Theyyam

Vishnumurthy is a sacred form of Lord Vishnu, Vishnumurthy Theyyam tells the story of the demon king Hiranyakashyap, his sincere son Prahlad, and he is an incarnation Narasimhamoorthy (an Avatar) of Vishnu. Prahlad represents Kannan and Hiranyakashyap represents Kuruvatu Moothakuruppu. In ancient times Hirany Kashyapu, a demon king was said to have gained a boon from Brahma which made him unbeatable. He could be killed neither day nor night. Neither inside or not outside of his house. Or by man or animal. Demon started disturbing the people he killed the people who worshiped lord Vishnu. But his own son was a devotee of lord Krishna and he tried to kill him many times. One day the boy told his father that Vishnu is everywhere, even in pillar and stones, then demon drew his sword and slashed open a pillar in the door way of his palace. Then Krishna, took his new avatar and become Narasimha with man –lion body and killed the demon on his door way.

Vishnumurthy Theyyam has another story which runs similar to the performance. Kannan, he was a great devotee of lord Vishnu and he was lower caste man who used to take care of cows. One days he was collecting cows and felt really hungry. Abruptly, he saw a mango tree which is belongs to higher caste family. He took the mango and started eating, suddenly higher caste men came and his servants beaten him badly. Higher caste community asked him to leave that village and informed to not come back. After few years Kannan came back to the same village and on the way he took shower in pond, where lower caste men and women were not allowed to take bath. People came to know this. Higher caste communities got really angry at Kannan and they killed him. Same time, Lord Vishnu was watching all these incidents that had happened to his devotee, then he appeared and destroyed the upper caste family.

The Theyyam throws himself into the red burning heap of burning woods. He is paying his devotion to God and struggling to balance his feelings in front of the devotees. After interviewing the performer, he says that his body burns all the time and he needs to do this for the community preservation. Some time he don't feel like throwing himself into the burning woods but the devotees push him minimum 101 times to the fire to show the anger of lord Vishnu. This particular Theyyam happens rarely. Performer says that 'I am a normal human being, of course, not a god, sometime, performer can badly burn too.'

Uchitta Theyyam

This Theyyam is performed as a female character. Uchitta is a cruelly satirical depiction of Devaki's eighth child, a female deity portrayed by male artistes. The performer ran about berating spectators in a tinny falsetto, inviting them to suckle at his breast. He was particularly rude to an elderly matriarch of the family, who bore the affront with good-hearted humor. The performer ran through the courtyard, scattering children, and climbed down the steps to the temple pond. There he enacted a bathing ritual, midway through which he turned up to the

crowd, put his index finger to his nose and let out an ear-splitting howl, “Eeeeeeee-heeeeeee!”, as if chastising them for watching him bathe. This elaborate and grotesque comedy didn’t end there. Uchitta was bent on sitting on red hot coals. His helpers pulled him away and he seemed to concede. But he immediately shook free of them and, like a child throwing a strange tantrum, placed himself squarely on the coals, showing no sign of anxiety as smoke began to rise from under him. His helpers desperately dragged him off only to have him repeat the exercise again, apparently enjoying the act of placing himself in mortal danger. To the local people this was an annual ritual they were familiar to and they sat around the courtyard eating, gossiping.

Myth behind Pottan Theyyam

Pottan Theyyam is one of the important Theyyam still today, since it deals with the caste system and the cultural contradictions of the society. Pottan sits on fire and asks the devotees whether they feel cold or not. He calls out few names and talk to their issues and problems at family. I have asked the performer, that why he wear the mask of a Pottan (smiling mask of an idiot). Performer told me that he wants to hide his painful and distorted face from the people since he sits on the fire for long time.

The myth behind the ‘Pottan Theyyam’ is traced to Sree Sankaracharya. While the latter was preparing to climb the ‘Sarwanjha Peedam’, considered to be the throne of knowledge, Lord Siva appeared disguised as a Dalit, with the intention to test his knowledge and sincerity. Lord Siva came as ‘Pulapottan’, accompanied by ‘Pulachamundi’, Parvathy Devi in disguise and ‘Pulamaruthan’, his minister Nadikesan. The Sankaracharya asked to go away as he did not want to be polluted by members of the lower caste. ‘Pottan’, who was Lord Siva in disguise, engaged Sankaracharya in a series of arguments in which the former exposes the insignificance of the caste system which divides the humanity and civilization into ridiculous fragments. These arguments are the major chants eulogized in ‘Tottam’ and contains great social messages. As a kind of question – answer teaching, Lord Shiva disguised as Pulaya Pottan asks the Sankaracharya, “If there is a cut on the body, the blood will come out and the blood of mine and yours will have the same color. So, what is the difference between us?” The Sankaracharya then realizes that it is Lord Shiva who is examining his knowledge and kindness towards the humanity. “It is blood that flows through our veins and we all are human beings; as we have to live in unity.” This teaching was the main message that Shiva offered to Sankaracharya.

Even now during the Pottan Theyyam performance, the performer chants all these teachings aloud to spread the message of humanity. There are a few other myths too in the emergence and performance of Pottan Theyyam. When the Pottan Theyyam enters for a performance, crowds gathered are in a state of breathless anxiety. It is a performance worth watching. In Pottan Theyyam performance, a part is enacted on fire. When the theyyam starts to perform, he

is believed to be strengthened by the spiritual power of God and starts to perform by lying and dancing on the fire. He is in a frenzied spell, dressed in strands of tender coconut leaves tied around the body, the anklets jingle in an alarming rhythm.

Structure/techniques of Theyyam

There are many variations in performance structure, but Theyyam are mainly divided into six part. Invocation of the deity, recitation of the god's story, possession of the performer, recitation of additional story, and giving blessings.

When I had a discussion with an old man who has been playing the different Theyyams last 60 years, he said that there is nothing can be altered as god. When I perform I am into it. I spend my all years performing and hearing the vocalization and drumming in my eyes and years. If we sit in room for long days without connect with anybody, and only concentrating then it is normal process.

Community Preservation

Theyyam ritual has a major role even today in the common life of people in north Kerala. Devotees go to a Theyyam performer in the temple and speak about their family problems, health issues, or social problems, and they are given answers to their problems by human-god. As Theyyam performer ManojKairalam mentioned it to me that they don't go to frenzied act and the transformation from human to god is something very important for the performer to explain it. Some of them says that they are really become the god, I strongly feel that it's the view of devotees, some of the performers says that they know what is happening around them, they are very conscious. This is a different perception another of performer. We do not differentiate the dancer as a person possessed by the spirit of the deity. The dancer becomes the deity. Theyyam performer can express the feeling in a dramatic manner, communicating and sharing their feelings with the devotees, which would help them to reach to a 'liminal' stage where they identify the issues of society and discuss them with the public. It's a fantastic moment where Theyyam performer starts his high concentration from the private place and gradually it takes a long way of rituals to the public space.

Theyyam performers are very clear what is happening in the community or in the village. Theyyam performer says that before performing in a village, he would arrive early and secretly to discover what problem were going on in this particular community. When he talks to the devotees he would use this as techniques/information to demonstrate the insight of the divine power and confirm their belief on him. His coworker will help him to identify the people from the village and they discuss the issues of their problems in a public sphere. The journey from a private room to the public space is an amazing journey since the performer has to perform many rituals till the end. If anyone misbehave at home, family and in the

community, they are so open to discuss in front other villagers. Ultimately, the problem will be discussed and resolved in the public through the performance.

Present Status of Theyyam

Theyyam is a collective reception, the politics of the collective reception is that it forms a collective voice without the intervention of an individual. It also embodies a kind of socio-political play where the whole community can discuss and resolve the problem within the community. I see Theyyam as an art practice than the sacred ritual where everyone get chance to share their problems at family and society and find a solution by the public itself, where everything is transparent to the whole community. This collective voice creates a powerful impact on others. The perception of Theyyam performance has been changed since they have no choice left to strive with the drastically changing world. When we look at the transformation of Theyyam, in to the consumer society, then the changes are clearly came into being in its sacred space. Now days Theyyam are performed or arranged by some organizations for the entertainment purpose or for republic day parade since they have been facing the reality of their life. There are many changes in socio-political and cultural process which had been affected in the past years. The new generation refuses to learn this art since there is no scope of yearning a regular income. Now many people have begun their work to create awareness among the youth. The support of international community is very vital for the protection of tradition

On other hand my research study attempts to look at the real problems that Theyyam ritual art and the artists have been facing for long time. Most of the Theyyams are virtually vanishing. In this context, many questions comes to mind, how will be the ritualistic performance of Theyyam continue to exist? Because Theyyam has been taken out today and performed for republic day or tourism advertisement. Are there any possibilities to invent, reintegrate and preserve the Theyyam performance? How to find a re-exhibition value of Theyyam to the realm of technology? What all lesson to theatre, can we pull from Theyyam in terms of space, design and body? What are the major alternatives to encourage Theyyam performance through theatre? What is the real situation of Theyyam and the performer in the currenttime? Where do we place this traditional ritual performance in the era of technology?

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