

Theyyam Dance of Kerala: Decoding Mnemonic Configurations

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Traditional art forms and celebrations are varied manifestations of community identities. Such formations primarily include excerpts of memories a community feels the need to preserve for the next generations. *Theyyam*, a predominantly Hindu ritual practiced in Northern Kerala and parts of South Karnataka is identified as a mnemonic strategy that encompasses the historicity of the region, critically maps contemporary social distinctions, and also aids community members in reasserting specific identities. On closer inspection, it displays all basic features enumerated by cultural memory studies like connection to a mythical past, ceremonial communications, formalised performances, and the presence of hierarchically structured carriers.¹ *Theyyam* is a mnemonic text that reiterates tales and codes of conduct practiced in a specific region for many thousand years. Apparently, it belongs to the past as well as the present and is considered a channel to maintain contact with God and from an academic perspective, history.

That being the case the following paper uses theories proposed by Memory Studies theorists like Jan Assmann, Jeanette Rodrigues, Astrid Erll, and others to establish how the very structure of this performance is aligned to mediate between generations. Reminiscent of antique cult practices this cultural artifact is in a state of flux. It now adorns the guise of a religious ritual annually performed in the *Kolathunadu*² region. In pre-colonial times the *Kolathiris*³ and in the present times their descendants are the patrons who manage these celebrations. Stone inscriptions said to be from 1379 at the Kandeswaram temple of Karkulam Taluk mentions *Theyyam*⁴. The earliest documented mention is found in Sanga literature as a dance ritual used by the Velan tribe to ward off evil spirits and seek blessings. Such references establish their

historicity and connection to an ancient cult. Nowadays it is periodically performed in temple premises or designated locations by select tribal communities of the region. The performance usually marks the beginning of planting, or harvesting season, temple festivals, or is performed during joint family gatherings. A highly stylised dance performance, in the accompaniment of traditional instruments, is enacted through the repetition of fixed patterns for a duration of ten to twenty-four hours, depending on the deity being worshipped.

Popularly known as the dance of Gods this form is referred to as *Kaliyattam* or *Thira* or *Daivattom* by local practitioners. A *Theyyam* mostly represents deities, human beings who died for a social cause, diseases like smallpox, or perhaps a common evil in the region that the community wants to ward off. In the original *thottampattus*⁵, thirty-five *theyyams* or *kuttiapparadevathas*⁶ are found mentioned. Now an estimated four hundred-plus *Theyyams* are active and enacted every year. Performances are conducted from November to May each year on designated dates and at corresponding sites. There are a few *Theyyams* that are not performed annually. For example, *Perumkaliyattam* is a week-long *Theyyam* festival held once in 12 years. On the other hand, *Muthapan Theyyam* is performed many times a year. Rice, toddy, fish, meat, etc. are offered to the deities during the festival. All said it is a unique occasion where the subaltern's metamorphosis into Gods is validated and even the upper castes bow their heads in reverence and seek blessings from these *Kolams*⁷. The following is the description given by K. N. N. Kurup:

Teyyam or *Teyyattam* is a popular ritual dance of Malabar which has become an inseparable part of the religion of the village folk. As a living cult with an ancient tradition, ritual and custom, it embraces almost all castes, classes and divisions of the Hindu community in this region. The ritual aspects and artistic forms of the dance fulfil the religious aspiration and aesthetic imagination of the common people.⁸

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Bappuran Theyyam recalls the story of a Muslim man whereas the *Pottan Theyyam* recalls lord Shiva's avatar as a commoner. Though promoted by high-class Brahmins, it significantly resembles tribal Dravidian ways of worship. Such essentials of manifestation have led academic circles to study it for the subversion of power relations it displays. In such studies the breaking of the binary, even though for a day, is probed for its audacity and sense of equality and for its instigations that motivated the rise of the subaltern communities.

Moving away from this often-travelled line of thought this paper analyses *Theyyam* as a mnemonic device that preserves community identity and space-specific histories. Activities such as festivals, rituals, traditions, dance forms, and holy places are here identified to contribute to collective identity formations and studied as mediating tactics to circulate marginalised histories.

Theoretical backdrop

Jan Assmann proposed the concept of Cultural Memory in the early 1980s and it is here borrowed to analyse this cultural artifact. Human beings are part of society and have personal and social memories. When personalised social memories intersect with personal memories of other community members collective memories arise. These are usually transferred orally and are active for three or four decades. Maurice Halbwachs (1877 -1945), a French sociologist, is among the first to think about societies as having a collective database. "Collective memory refers to the shared pool of memories, knowledge, and information of a social group that is significantly associated with the group's identity."⁹ It is basically an informal intergenerational transfer of origin or identity-related ideas among family or community members. Articulations of such memories assist groups in acclimatising with and retaining their identity. Though Jan Assmann acknowledges the significance of collective memories in the formation of long-term memories he complained collective memory lacked "cultural characteristics"¹⁰ and was short-lived. To improve the concept further he introduced the concept of cultural memory.

Jan Assmann studied memory culture with respect to many early civilizations and identified memory points to be both static and in a state of flux depending on the mnemonic devices used to contain it. Jan Assmann thus modified and defined cultural memory as: "comprises that body of reusable texts, images and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, the cultivation of which serves to stabilise and convey that society's self-images."

¹¹ Elements of cultural memory find resonance in individuals or groups, long after collective interactions

cease to exist. Hence this paper with the help of a theoretical backdrop that connects memory individual and culture probes a traditional and vibrant art form of expression, still active in all its glory, as a mnemonic text capable of evoking, transforming, and preserving cultural thoughts specific to a community. A detailed discussion of the characteristic features of Cultural Memory is found in Jan Assmann's essay "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" published in 1995. In addition to this he also identifies sites and figures of memory that help and maintain the formation and flow of memories.

Conversation

Theyyam is identified as a meticulously sketched-out memory space, that connotes the memories a community has condensed for future reference. Communities remember only those elements that provide their members with a set identity pattern. People from the Northern regions of Kerala consider *Theyyam* as the culture of the region irrespective of caste or creed differences and systematically adhere to its rules, forming a cultural configuration specific to the region. The figure and the rhythm are entrenched in their local culture and mythology. The Cultural Memory Studies paradigm helps to identify certain recurring devices in such ancient practices which helps to decode this cultural configuration. Stories related to *Theyyam* have mythical origins and are part of the local belief system. *Keralolpathi*,¹² a historical record, endorses Parasuraman as having entrusted the task of conducting *Theyyams* to tribal communities after he created the land now marked as Kerala. Such stories unite religion, environment, culture, and aesthetics and its rigid sense of repetition makes *Theyyam* a cultural text.

Elderly members of the community lead the program ensuring maximum adherence to traditional ways. "In primitive tribes, the old people are the guardians of tradition Society by giving old people the function of preserving the traces of its past, encourages them to devote whatever spiritual energy they may still possess to the act of recollection."¹³ The performers are treated as spiritual leader even when they belong to lower caste groups. *Theyyam* performances include the active participation of a large number of groups in the locality and are hence connective structures. The answer to why a ritual is done in a particular way will be because it has been done so for centuries. It is estimated that a very similar form of performance has been enacted un-disrupted for nearly 800 to 1,500 years. Even though the routines of the art open infinite opportunities for teamwork, it is basically a repetitive act with recognisable patterns in a shared cultural milieu. The participants hope to invoke the

blessing of their ancestral deity and appease their divine wrath. Even the divinity associated with the folk form can be read as a tactic to ensure maximum participation. Participation can include cooking, serving, organising, playing music, or anything related to a successful *Theyyam* performance.

During *Theyyam* performances there are two stages of knowledge sharing: the first is intergenerational interaction that enables the sharing of feelings and ideas about the neighbourhood, the river, the deity, people, myths, etc. This happens throughout the year as the community prepares for the next season. These collectively consolidate human bonding, generate social spaces, and allow horizontal conversations and transformations. Many mnemonic objects, rituals, books, pictures, etc. are also at work simultaneously. At the time of the performance, community members are drawn together into a particular space at a particular time dictated by a cultural calendar. Secondly, when the same is discussed in academic platforms these regional histories or micro narratives get transferred to a wider public. On the whole, these art and media practices are to be understood as a way of preserving a lifestyle under threat, and can therefore be seen as symbolic, relational, and material forms of cultural resistance. Thus, cultural memory dictums are found actualised through *Theyyam* performances.

Analytical Interpretations

The paper probes a few activities related to *Theyyam* to analyse how they function as systems of memory. These systematic modes of mediation have enabled it to interact with the past and present and hint at the future at any given opportunity. *Theyyam* is a memory-based presentation and hence needs continuous inputs from society.

1. As site of collective memory

Maurice Halbwachs argued that collective memory is shaped within a social framework. Even though vibrant and elaborate, the timelessness of *Theyyam* depends on its systematic and active social framework. Collective memory defines three important frames of social memory namely family, religion, and traditions. Evidently, *Theyyam* confirms within these frameworks prescribed for identity formation. At no stage of its enactment can the performer give a solo performance. Right from the training days to the actual performance, it is a group activity. "The *theyyams* were the collective constructions of a society, in the process imagination of many people is involved at many levels."¹⁴ The audience gathers for the

activity to identify themselves as belonging to a group. Participation in *Theyyam*-related activities validates the group's place in society. If they know and understand the rituals and *Thottams* they are part of the culture. Those who do not adhere to this system are treated as 'Others,' outcasts. Thus, the concentration on collective memory shifts the gaze from the subject to the group in which the text, here *Theyyam* performs.

Theyyam performances begin with *Thottam*. It is a ritualistic narration that sets the background for the upcoming presentation. The artist adorned in red head gear sings aloud verses recapping the evolution of the *Theyyam* chosen for performance. After this he goes and changes into the prescribed costume. *Thottams* initiates discussions and members interact, recall their collective knowledge, and acknowledge the truth claims in the verses. In this milieu, a socio-cultural exchange is enabled. "The *thottams* eulogies the god, explain the origin of the *theyyams*, narrate their divine acts, tell the reason to come down to earth, mention the places where they reside and let know the outcome of worshipping (*bhalasruthi*)."¹⁵ Each *Theyyam* has a unique historical significance in the locality where it is performed and this is reiterated through the *thottam* narration which may extend up to five hours. Some deities may be connected to many micronarratives. If so, their *thottams* will be longer.

The term collective memory introduced by Maurice Halbwachs suggests a person remembers only by situating himself "at the intersection of several currents of collective thought states."¹⁶ *Thottam* initiates this intersection. It is believed that once the *Thottam* is over the performer will be possessed by divinity. Since *Thottampattu* or *Vaytharu*, precedes the actual *Theyyam* performance it aids in understanding the sociolinguistics and cultural lineage of the *Theyyam* to the region. Elaborate arrangements are made to schedule the performance. Members talk, discuss, arrange funds, and prepare for the event throughout the year. Members living far away arrive yearly to attend this function, ensuring group interactions and bonding. Evidently, collective memory associated with *Theyyam* is socially mediated and relates to a specific group.

2. *Theyyam* as a social tradition

The paper identifies *Theyyam* as a mnemonic tradition repeated periodically. Therefore, the concept of tradition introduced by Jeanette Rodriguez is applied to find tropes of memory. *Theyyams* demonstrate resilience and an ability to respond to contemporary needs while preserving its historical roots. "Traditions carry personal as well as communal experiences of people: its implicit and explicit understanding, myths, stories, affectives

- anything that actualises the potential of the human person.”¹⁷ A vigorously performative spectacle *Theyyam* is both an artistic product as well as a medium through which community identities are mediated. It is a dialogical practice with each *Theyyam* having a predetermined purpose for its annual visit.

As any tradition it has two components “*Traditio*” – the process and “*tradium*” which includes the effect of the process on its participants.¹⁸ *Theyyam* is a tradition specifically performed by members of *Mavilan, Vattuvan, Pulayan, Anjuttan, Munnutan, Chingathan, Karimpalan, and Koppalan*, tribes. Once selected to perform for the year, the artisan along with his team informally identifies the contemporary issues in the group/family associated with that particular *Theyyam*. He goes around talking to people and understands their problems. Before the *Thottam* he officially seeks blessing from the deity he worships, his ancestors, patrons, and the elders around him. He observes fasting and abstinence. Hence the process has significant influence on the individual performer and the community as a whole.

Months of preparation go behind the successful completion of this ritual. Women of traditional houses prepare the required paddy and feasts are prepared for large groups. The carpenters prepare the *peedom* (ritual seat) and pavilion, the *pallival* (sacred sword), and the hand lamp are contributions of the blacksmith, and the requirements for bronze and gold items are fulfilled by the bronze smith and goldsmith in the region. On the other hand, members of the *thiyyas* community bring the *kalasam* (toddy pot), oil is brought in by the *vaniyan* and ritually purified clothes by the *veluthedan*. The auspicious time is calculated by the *kaniyan* group. Supervision and security duties are entrusted to the *nair, nambiar* and *pothuval* members. The *pulayas* are to bring mats needed for the ceremony.¹⁹ Hence all community members of the region are assigned tasks related to their livelihood. The tradition hence becomes part of their daily routine and hence not a burden.

Refined images ideas and ideals about one’s role in society when redefined improve interpersonal relationships and energise and bind the members till the next process. Halbwachs warns that if traditional values are eliminated for the sake of modernity, finding an equivalent binding factor will not be an easy task. The people of this region seem to have foreseen the warning issued by Halbwachs. Halbwachs says: “That is why we remain attached to formulas, symbols, and conventions, as well as rites that must be repeated and reproduced ... to preserve the beliefs Through this attachment to traditional values the society of yesterday and the successive periods of social evolution are perpetuated today.”²⁰ Hence in the select community, the past is

retained and remembered in some form or another using artistic performances.

Many other ritualistic traditions like fire dance, animal sacrifices, offering of grains and other commodities, etc. are also part of *Theyyam* performances. As the *Theyyam* performers narrate and perform, the cultural memory of the tribe is refined revisited, and re-embedded. As the group goes through a tradition and its processes, aspirations, feelings, and biases are analysed and revamped for the coming years. *Theyyam* has adapted to changes in society and external cultural influences while still preserving its core elements. For example, it has incorporated modern materials and technologies into costume and makeup, demonstrating its ability to respond to contemporary influences.

3. As mnemonic repertoire

Mnemonic devices have played a crucial role in human history, aiding in the preservation and transmission of cultural, religious, and historical knowledge. Each *Theyyam* is a reminder of a virtue or incident and hence all *Theyyams* together embody the cultural history of the area. The study of mnemonic devices is an integral part of the study of cultural memory. At the sight of certain objects, people remember important aspects of their culture and identity. *Theyyam* performers use intricate masks, *mundis* (colourful head gears), carry *pallival* (swords), and wear elaborate costumes. Tradition-enforcing items like lamps, swords, toddy pots, *peedom*, etc are also part of this mnemonic system. These differ based on the various deities and characters from local myths and legends they represent. Male performers wear anklets and bangles because their incarnate deities are mostly females. Red colour predominates all associated activities adding festivity and deeper impressions. Tangible reminders of the stories and cultural heritage associated with the deities are chiefly reinforced through deities.

Moreover, the performances are held in *mundyas, stanams, palliyara, tharavadu*. or shrines dedicated to the deities. These physical spaces are symbolic of sacred spaces and serve as material anchors for the community’s religious and cultural memory. The unique musical instruments played during *Theyyam* rituals, such as *chenda* (a type of drum), wind instruments like *Kuzhal, Perumbara, Couth, Cherututi, Utukku*, and *Chermangalamands*, contribute to the sensory experience and evoke a sense of cultural continuity. Apart from this *Theyyam* is a storehouse of ritual symbolisms that immediate community members recognise and identify and hope future generations will recognise, through yearly exposure. So great pains are taken to maintain traditional patterns for the sake of continuity. The idea

of the performer being possessed by God symbolises the connection between the human and divine realms. Each *Theyyam* performance is, in essence, a form of storytelling through dance, music, and symbolic gestures. Hence *Theyyam* is once again established as a cultural text.

When compared, there are striking similarities in performative techniques adopted by *Theyyam* and ancient ritualistic tribal performances. Orality, compulsory community participation, and adherence to a cultural calendar that marks seasons, festivals, and annual activities foster a sense of shared identity and contribute to the preservation of cultural memory. These recurring celebrations serve as important reminders of the cultural traditions and beliefs associated with *Theyyam*.

4. A site of cultural memory

Another unique feature that makes these *Theyyams* part of cultural memory is their confinement to a specific geographical area. Except for *Theyyams* like *Muthappan* and *Puthiya Bhagavathi Theyyams* which are not constrained by spatial boundaries, all other *Theyyams* are performed within “the purview of a *desam* (traditional political unit) and *desacharams* (customs of a *desam*)”²¹. *Theyyams* do not cross their regional boundary – the Kolathiri Kingdom. The boundary is marked by Korapuzha or Elathur Puzha near Kozhikode city. Some scholars attribute this feature to the tribal origins of *Theyyam* Folklore or its indefinite antiquity. If performed outside its designated sites they are considered guest appearances and viewers are not entitled to normal ritualistic benefits.

Pierre Nora introduces the term *Lieux de memoire* or sites of memory to embody the transition from true memory to constructed places. He presents them as artificial placeholders when collective memories diffuse due to time and new stimuli. He points out certain places “stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalise death, to materialise the immaterial” and thereby “capture maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs.”²² During colonisation and religious conversions, it is these sites and traditions associated that served as anchors for confused communities. Nora believes memory has to be reminded through sites of memory. A *Kavu*, a temple-like premises or *stanam* a space sanctified by religious leaders is selected as the performative space for *Theyyam* concerts. In this space, the practitioner irrespective of caste and gender assumes the role of God. Except for one all *Theyyams* are performed by male artists. *Devakooth* is the only woman *Theyyam* performed in Kerala.

Theyyams instruct and bless their subjects and give them the necessary guidance for improving their lives. *Theyyams* are identified by their costume and the place

they perform at. Jan Assmann says: “Cultural memory is defined mainly by its exteriorized, objectified and stored symbolical forms that can be transferred in different contexts and times, using the external objects as carriers of memory.”²³ These sites of memory essentially, mediate between active memory and the historical consciousness of the group. In the absence of active collective memory, people are reminded of traditions, customs, and historical events at the sight of these structures or figures. As Jan Assmann says: “Remembering is a realization of belonging, even a social obligation. One has to remember in order to belong.”²⁴ When in the presence of such sites group members revamp their memory and feel a sense of pride in being able to represent and participate in a specific role. This humbles and honours them. For similar gratification, tribal members are seen worshipping rock paintings, traditional artifacts, holistic healing procedures, spiritual and aboriginal cosmology, etc. These create an interactive space that historical archives of dominant discourses fail to destroy.

5. As bearers of cultural memory

Jan Assmann’s paradigm also identifies certain bearers of cultural memory. He has also referred to them as figures of memory. Collective memory does need specialists. All members are carriers. Jan Assmann remarks: “Cultural memory always has its specialists, both in oral and in literate societies. These include shamans, bards, and griots, as well as priests, teachers, artists, clerks, scholars, mandarins, rabbis, mullahs, and other names for specialized carriers of memory.”²⁵ Interestingly each *Theyyam* incarnations themselves possess the features required to act as a cultural bearer. Their very presence in the community is a celebration of a local deity or legend the community wants to remember and preserve for future generations. An innumerable number of anecdotes circulate related to a *Theyyam*. This increases its visibility and power to interact. As Jan Assmann would claim they connect memory, culture, and the group. Cultural memory is group specific and so are *Theyyams*.

Theyyams have three tropes of memory in them. First, they borrow the mythical origin of the religious or legendary figures they propitiate. Secondly, they are specialised performers who are trained from a young age and are chosen because of their ancestral lineage. Their songs and historical awareness are unmatched in the region. Thirdly, the community bestows upon them the right to admonish, correct, guide, and solve civil problems in the region. Like the cultural bearers envisaged by Jan Assmann, they sing songs, talk to community members, tell stories, and keep the collective interactions alive. They are not regular performers but once they are conferred

divine status people respect and obey them. *Theyyams* mediate between God and the populace. The presence of *Theyyams* in the Northern part of Kerala has restricted Brahminical invasions of culture to a great extent. Apart from sites, traditions, and rituals, they are important transporters of cultural memory.

The paper will now quickly review a few *Theyyams* and the interesting traditions associated with them. *Muthappan Theyyam* is performed at Parassinikkadavu temple in Kannur and the ceremonial rites are performed by the *Thiyyar* community. Muthappan temples even today offer chickpeas and coconut slices as offerings in memory of Chandan's wife, from a mythical story, who served boiled gram, slices of coconut, burnt fish, and toddy to the Muthappan to save her husband's life. Her devotion made Lord Vishnu disguised as Muthappan to spare her husband and also ordained *Kunnathoor Padi* as his abode. During his wanderings, Lord Muthappan was always accompanied by a dog and even today devotees treat dogs as holy creatures. The first prasada of the day is offered to one of the dogs at the temple before being circulated among devotees. Simplicity of life, devotion, God's wisdom, love for humanity, etc. are expressed through *Theyyam's* narrative.

On the other hand, through the *Pottan Theyyam* members are reminded of God's dislike for caste discrimination and related atrocities. Ideas of secularism are invoked through a story in which Lord Shiva questions Sree Sankaracharya, a learned man blinded by his knowledge and sense of self-importance. The sharpness of the questions makes Sankaracharya realise his mistakes and develop more humane qualities. The recital of *Pottan Daivam Thottam* is highly inspirational and marks the beginning of a revolt against caste systems in Kerala. Though called *Pottan*, meaning fool in the regional dialect, the figure carves the respect of everyone gathered. During the performance, the *Pottan Theyyam* lies on the embers of a large fire at the *stanam* and shouts out complaining about the heat of the fire engulfing him. The audience loudly requests him to get up symbolically marking their decision to reform. After the performance and customs, the locals approach the artist to listen to his responses and seek blessing.

Rakthachamundy Theyyam is one of the most spectacular *Theyyams* and is religious in origin. The legend states how the goddess Durga drank the blood of Raktabija before the drops fell to the ground to kill him. The demon had previously received a boon which enabled the conversion of his blood into thousands of demons of equal strength when his blood touched the ground. Misusing his powers, he had started committing several atrocities. On being requested to help the goddess Durga engaged the demon in a fierce battle. Due to his boon, he could not be

defeated. So, with the assistance of Kali Durga cleverly killed Raktabija in the final battle. Thus, this *Kolam* reminds one of the triumphs of good over evil, female emancipation, and power, and reassures the devotees of God's powers. Dance and drama are the hallmarks of this fierce form.

Muchilot Bhagavati Theyyam represents a brave, beautiful young, learned girl in her human form. She was challenged to a debate by her Brahmin teacher, Peringellur Mootha Gurukkal. Jealous and frightened of defeat he and his team asked the girl what the greatest pain and greatest pleasure. The young girl replied that giving birth and love-making were the tasks that gave greatest pain and pleasure respectively. Taking this as an opportunity to defeat her the teacher questions her experience to give such an answer. Her honour was questioned and her virginity doubted. She was expelled from her house and soon she committed suicide. With the grace of Lord Shiva, she made her presence felt at Muchilot Padanair's vaniya household. The tree in front of their house became her abode. The man who belonged to the Muchilot clan and served under the *Kolathiri* and his wife became ardent devotees. They believed the goddess brought peace and harmony to their clan. Hence this story also basically reminds the people of the origin of their belief systems and their traditions.

Kandanar Kelan Theyyam is perhaps the most intense, fast-paced, and fiery *Theyyam* of all. It tells the legend of an adventurous boy named Kelan caught in a forest fire. He was later resurrected by the warrior god called *Wayanattu*. The *Theyyam* recital includes the *Kolam* running through the pyre and stomping it. This reflects Kelan's anger towards the blaze that took his life. The audience is mesmerised by this daring antic of the *Kolam* adding to *Kelan Theyyam's* popularity. The ritual ends with the dancers showering blessings in the form of turmeric powder and rice. In the end, as the music winds to a close, devotees throw rice grains on the *Theyyam*.

When these cultural bearers are analysed one finds most of the female goddesses belong to the fertility cult. The *Mandramoorthi Theyyams* signify naughtiness and magic. Symbolising war and bravery *Theyyams* belonging to warrior backdrops are also the favourites of the audience. "Among the theyyams there are Mother Goddesses like Kali, Bhagavathi, Paradevatha, Chamundi, mandramoorthi like Bhairavan, Kuttichathan, Kandakarnan, Uchitta, Gulikan, heros like Pataveeran, Kudiveeran, Pandiveeran, Kathivanur Veeran, Padar Kulangara Veeran ancestors like Muthappan, Vayanattukulan, Thondachan, Karanon Theyyam, serpent gods like Nagakanni, Nagayakshi, Nagarajavu, and there gods in animal forms like Puliyur Kali, Pulikkarinkali, Puliyur Kannan, Pulimaran,

Kandappuli, Marappuli.”²⁶ All females in the *Theyyam* cult are envisioned as independent and virgins.

Conclusion

Looking into features of cultural memory in *Theyyam* performances one finds the concretisation of identity in relation to a group the most evident feature. As Jan Assmann says: “Cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity.”²⁷ *Theyyam* performance helps the group to ascertain because we are part of this artistic performance and we belong to this culture and land. This creates a unique niche for the validation of their ethnic identities. The dancing gods of *Kolathunadu* belong to them. Secondly, both Halbwachs and Jan Assmann reiterate that memory cannot recall the whole past but only “which each society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference.”²⁸ The stories and figures chosen for *Theyyam*'s performance clearly indicate the image the group wants to showcase.

The people from these regions have entrusted the documentation of their tribal understandings to *Theyyams*. *Theyyam* narrations integrate oral stories, songs, poems, images, landscapes, structures, etc. These elements indirectly get historicised through *Theyyams*. With each performance the group gets organised, cultivates specialised practices, and feels obliged to follow normative structures proliferated by *Theyyams*. Thus, *Theyyams* educate, civilise, and humanise group members through socially interactions narratives. *Theyyams* with their special ways and tales encourage the people of the group to self-reflexively reform for the betterment of themselves, their families, and their cultural moorings.

Notes

1. Assmann, Jan. “Communicative and Cultural Memory.” *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008, 109-18, p. 117.
2. Kolathunadu in the North Malabar region was under the administrative control of the Kolattiri royal family. Ezhimala was its capital.
3. *Kolathiris* were rulers of *Kolathunadu*, descendants of the Mushaka royal family.
4. K. Geetha. “The Theyyams of North Kerala: The Little Gods of Little Kingdom.” *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*. Vol 10, Issue 2, 16-20. www.questjournals.org, p. 16.
5. *Thottampattus* or *Vaytharu*, (both terms indicate oral transfer) are mythological songs sung before the commencement of *Theyyam* performances.
6. *Kuttiapparadevathas* – small ancestral goddesses.
7. *Kolams* physical manifestation of *Theyyam* in a particular form, shape, and costume.
8. Kurup, K.K.N. “Teyyam of Kerala.” New Delhi: Sangeetha Natak Academy, 1979, Internet Archive. 45-52, <https://archive.org/details/dli.ministry.23732>, p. 45.
9. Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Translated by Lewis A. Coser. University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 10.
10. Assmann, Jan. “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.” Translated by John Czaplicka, Berlin: *Walter de Gruyter*, no. 65, 1995, pp. 125-33. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/488538, p. 126.
11. *Ibid*, p. 132.
12. *Keralolpathi* is a Malayalam Hindu literary work that deals with the origin and legends of the land of Kerala and is attributed to the writer Ezhuthachan, poet and translator.
13. Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory. op. cit.*, p. 48.
14. K. Geetha. *op. cit.*, p. 17.
15. K. Geetha. *op. cit.*, p. 17.
16. Halbwachs, Maurice. *The Collective Memory*. Translated by Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter, New York: New Harper & Row, 1980, p. 33.
17. Rodriguez, Jeanette, and Ted Fortier, editors. “The Concept of Cultural Memory.” *Cultural Memory: Resistance Faith and Identity*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007, 7-14, p. 9.
18. Rodriguez, Jeanette, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
19. K. Geetha. *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.
20. Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory. op. cit.*, p. 120.
21. K. Geetha. *op. cit.*, p. 19.
22. Nora, Pierre. “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” Translated by Marc Roudebush, *Representations*, no. 26, Spring, 1989, 7-24, www.jstor.org/about/terms.html, p. 19.
23. Assmann, Jan. “Communicative and Cultural Memory.” *op. cit.*, p. 111.
24. *Ibid*, p. 114.
25. Assmann, Jan. “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.” *op. cit.*, p. 131.
26. K. Geetha. *op. cit.*, p. 17.
27. Assmann, Jan. “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.” *op. cit.*, p. 130.
28. Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory. op. cit.*, p. 19.