

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Sacred Liminality: Mappila Theyyam and Multicultural Communitas in North Malabar**

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Abstract

This paper examines Mappila Theyyam, a distinctive ritualistic art form in North Malabar, Kerala, that significantly influences social harmony and a synthesized lifestyle in this society. Mappila Theyyam is performed in pockets of North Malabar, where certain Hindu castes, like *Maavilar*, *Koppalar*, and *Vannan*, perform the rituals that include core elements of the Muslim community. These religious rituals are highly influenced in catalyzing the social capital of this society. Using the methodologies of Alan Dundes' anthropological studies of folklore and Victor Turner's performative theory of ritual, the researcher analyses how different religious elements work simultaneously, which ultimately leads to a space for interfaith dialogue and community bonding. The role of mythical stories behind this performance and its transformations through generations uncover its function of social cohesion. The findings of this paper demonstrate the role of Mappila Theyyam in catalyzing religious synthesis in practice, creating a liminal space where people live as a part of society without boundaries. In the current scenario, people and societies are polarised based on religious and ethnic identities, where traditional religious rituals like Mappila Theyyam still play a crucial role in stabilizing societies through communal resilience. Therefore, this study further highlights how traditional performing arts can function as mechanisms for promoting interfaith understanding in contemporary society.

Keywords: Mappila Theyyam, North Malabar, Multiculturalism, Communitas, Liminal

Mappila Theyyam is a distinctive art performance found in North Malabar, especially in the Kasargod and Kannur districts of Kerala state. There are more than four hundred Theyyam performances in different parts of Kerala, especially in the northern parts, where we can find fifteen Mappila Theyyams in North Malabar. From a geographical perspective, North Malabar includes the Chandragiri River in the North, Korappuzha (Kora River) in the South, borders of Wayanad district in the East East, and the Arabian Sea in the West (Kuttu, 2010). Therefore, North Malabar is known for its unique features, such as its cuisine, local dialects, and multicultural lifestyle. In this context, the study of Mappila Theyyam and its influence on this society will explore the nuances of the North Malabar social fabric and the functions of Mappila Theyyam in

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it. The researcher wishes to analyze the contemporary significance of Mappila Theyyam and its unique features in perpetuating social harmony and a syncretic lifestyle in North Malabar. To develop the study, the researcher found the methodologies of Alan Dundes' anthropological studies of folklore and Victor Turner's performative theory of ritual to be very relevant for further scrutinizing the nuances of Mappila Theyyam.

Theyyam, the age-old ritualistic art form of North Kerala, often called the enchanting dance of the deities, expresses the physical presence of a deity, a Hindu god or goddess or a character from folk tales or a venerated person (M, 2023). It is also known as *Kaliyattam* or *Tira* and contains rituals and customs associated with the temple, which are performed in Kaavu (sacred grove), which is located near their home or community. According to Payyanad (2013),

“it is a method of worship wherein a myth happens to be woven in connection with which a *devata* indulges in a dance of possession propitiating the same and showering the blessing on believers commonly found in this region. Where the performance of *Bhutan* and *thira* is common in Palakkad, *thira* alone in Kozhikode as well as Malappuram and *Theyyam* in Kannur and Kasargod and *Bhutan* in Kasargod and South Canara of Karnataka.”

Although there are different Theyyam performances in Northern Kerala, the majority of them are found in North Malabar. The myth associated with Theyyam performances is discussed by Payyanad as “Generally there are three phases in the myths associated with Theyyam, 1) the origin of *devata* (deity) 2) the transformation of *devata* into Theyyam 3) the tale of the *devatha* reaching different *streams* (positions). The one that contains all three can be called a complete Theyyam myth, as in the myth of *Wayanattukulavan* (Payannad, 2013). Therefore, the myth related to *Theyyam* performances in Northern Kerala has its religious base, where the combinations of Mappila Theyyam performances have their mythical histories to share.

Mappila Theyyam: Types and Traditions

Myths of Mappila Theyyam need to be read in the context of North Malabar's sociocultural life. The unique geographical position of North Malabar between the Arabian Sea in the West and the Western Ghats in the East created diversified socio-economic conditions. Since ancient times, the influence of the Monsoon climate has brought many traders to the North Malabar coast. Traders from neighboring states also flowed into North Malabar's coast to trade in this market. Extensive imports and exports in Mappila Bay and Valapattanam coasts and river interlinking to the interiors of the mainland stimulated a huge trade hub in North Malabar. This gradually promoted a multicultural society in North Malabar as they were exposed to cosmopolitan culture. Furthermore, the North Malabar community was accommodative, which catalyzed multiculturalism in this land. Thus, North Malabar turned out to be a multicultural society with diverse people of different religions and multilinguistic features. Therefore, most of the myths behind Mappila Theyyam have certain elements of accommodating fellow beings without looking into their religious identity.

Mappila Theyyam is performed by Hindu communities such as *Maavilar*, *Koppalar*, and *Vannan*, who incorporate Islamic ritual elements such as *Aadhan*, *Namaz*, and *Iqamath* in their performances (Daivikam, 2024). Important Mappila Theyyam performances found in North Malabar include *Aalikkutti Theyyam*, *Kalandan Mukri Theyyam*, *Mukri Pokker Theyyam*, *Bappiriyan Theyyam*, *Koyikkal Mammadu Theyyam*, *Pekkadath Mappila Theyyam*, *Kallayi Mammu Theyyam*, *Neythiyar Theyyam*, *Soolikkallu Beevi Theyyam* (*Vaidaru Muthachi Theyyam*), and *Ummachi Theyyam* (Vadakkiniyil & Angillath, 2019). These diverse forms of Mappila Theyyam have their own mythical stories that have inspired communities to maintain these rituals to the present day.

Kalandan Mukri Theyyam, a significant form of Mappila Theyyam in North Malabar, was

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traditionally performed at Kamballoor Kotta, near Chittarikkal. The *Tharavadu* (ancestral home) of Kamballoor Kotta was a wealthy family that served as a source of support for poor villagers. In the absence of medical facilities, *Tharavadu* developed a vast collection of natural medicines to treat the public. The *Tharavadu* of Kamballoor Kotta and its surroundings were protected by *Bhagvathi* (mother goddess) and *Chamundi (theyyam)*, with *Chamundi Bhagavathi's* order and wishes executed. When Sainudheen, an Islamic religious propagator, visited Pulingom, the Kamballoor *Tharavadu* provided him shelter and space to build a masjid. The famous *Uroos* (religious prayer festival) of Pulingom Juma masjid was established with the approval of Kamballoor Kotta *Tharavadu*. Therefore, the Kamballoor *Tharavadu* demonstrates the *Tharavadu's* crucial role in fostering a harmonious social structure. Kalandan, the *Mukri* (who led the prayers in the Masjid), was renowned for his knowledge of *Vaidhyam* (traditional medicine) and his ability to treat people with mental disorders. The local people's growing belief in Kalandan's power led them to neglect *Chamulassi*, their native God. In response, *Chamulassi* caused Kalandan to drown in the river. Subsequently, people faced several issues in their daily lives until the Kamballoor family intervened and consulted a *Kaniyan* (traditional astrologer) to resolve the issue. The *Kaniyan* determined that Kalandan *Mukri* should be respected for his abilities through the creation of a *Theyyam* in his name. Thus, Kalandan *Mukri* Mappila *Theyyam* was established, continuing his legacy among the natives (Vadakkiniyil & Angillath, 2019).

Another version of the Kalandan Mappila *Theyyam* myth relates that while preparing for the *Uroos*, Kalandan went to the Pulingom River for fishing, where he saw some light in the river, jumped into it, and died. After his death, many issues arose in Kamballoor *Tharavadu* and Aakko Kaavu, prompting the family to consult a *Kaniyan*. The *Kaniyan* advised that Kamballoor *Bhagavathi Theyyam* should be performed alongside Kalandan *Mukri*, as he was considered equal to or close to *Bhagavathi*. Since then, the Kamballoor *Aandu Maholsavam* (annual festival) has been celebrated with Kalandan *Mukri's* presence (Moovand Kaliyattam, 2022). These mythical narratives associated with Mappila *Theyyam* continue to influence and maintain these age-old traditions in contemporary society

Kallayi Mammu represents another significant form of Mappila *Theyyam* in North Malabar. According to mythological accounts, Mammu was an elderly man who wandered near Mayilan Parakkavu village. He possessed extraordinary magical powers that enabled him to heal people's diseases and predict their futures. During his stay near the Kaavu, he received food from Marunan, a *Mavilan* (caste) who was responsible for maintaining the Kaavu and lighting it in the evenings. One day, Mammu called Marunan and gave him medicine, instructing him to apply it to his wife's body to cure her ailment. Marian was astonished that Mammu knew about his wife's illness, as she had been suffering from skin disease for an extended period without finding an effective treatment. When Marunan applied the medicine, his wife was completely cured by morning. As news of this miracle spread through the village, many people began approaching Mammu for various needs. Those who sought Mammu's help invariably returned satisfied, as he provided precise remedies for their problems. Over time, Kallayi Mammu earned deep respect from society, and people began to regard him with divine reverence, attributing godlike healing powers to him. Their belief in his abilities and the resulting peace in their lives eventually led to his deification as a Mappila *Theyyam* in North Malabar society (Vadakkiniyil & Angillath, 2019)

Among the mythical stories related to Mappila *Theyyam* is that of Aali, a magician and scholar known for his ability to entrap young women as lovers. Once, he insulted a woman from the village. She feared and ran away and sought refuge in a temple. She prayed to *Bhagavathi* for her protection. Thus, *Bhagavathi* entered her body and waited on the path to Aali's home. He was killed by *Bhagavathi*. However, Aali, as a

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magician, became a God's avatar. Therefore, we can find the *Aali Theyyam* in Arikkottu Palattukulangara *Bhagavathi* temple in Kumbala, Kasargod district of Kerala (Menon, 2021). Koyikkal Mammad *Theyyam* came into the picture of North Malabar society based on a story where Koyi Mammadu cut the trees of *Valiyamalakkotta Kizhakkan Kaavu*, which was forbidden by *Maram Chamundi*. As a result, *Maram Chamundi* killed Koyi Mammadu by hitting him down from the tree. Later, Koyi Mammadu *Theyyam* was performed as Mappila Theyyam. in Nileschwaram Mouvveni Kovilakam (palace of the Kshatriya family). Bappiriyan *Mappila Theyyam* is performed in Sathinapuram, Manjeshwaram, and Kasargod. He was a trader and sailor who owned ships. Once, Aryan Poongani (goddess) came to Malabar on Bappiriya's ship, where he fought against the enemy to protect the *devata*. Therefore, wherever *Aryan Poonkkani* performs, *Bappiriyan* also appears there as Mappila Theyyam (Menon, 2021).

Another story is the Mukri Pokker's Theyyam, which revolves around Kolooth *Tharavadu*. According to the findings of Ashraf Thoonery (M, 2023)

“the story of Mukri Pokker is that he came from Ullal in Karnataka to *Kooloth Theravada* (ancestral house) to look after the affairs of the house. But he got romantically involved with a woman there, thus inviting the wrath of the family members. One day, he was found dead under mysterious circumstances. Although it was impossible to kill him because he was wearing a talisman, it is believed that he was killed when he took off the talisman to take a bath. When the *Tharavadu* faced problems, an astrologer was consulted, and it was advised that Mukri Pokker also be treated as a Theyyam, along with other *Theyyams* staged at the *Tharavadu* every year.”

These are different mythical stories related to Mappila Theyyam, which support the practice of Mappila Theyyam in contemporary North Malabar society. Apart from males, there are a few female Mappila Theyyams in North Malabar.

Female Mappila Theyyams are also celebrated in North Malabar with equal respect in different parts, where each is treated as a Mappila Theyyam based on certain mythical stories followed by generations. Soolikkallu Beevi appeared in myths as an old woman who sits in the forest and talks to wild animals. This showed her magic compared to an ordinary person. Once, Gundamayya, King of Thulunaadu, met with an accident where his entire body was wounded badly. Several treatments had not cured the wounds. Later, the King learned about Soolikkallu Beevi and requested treatment from her. Beevi cured the wounds, and the King offered half of the country as a gift to Beevi, but she rejected the offer and requested to live a simple spiritual life. The researcher identified that myths promoted in Mappila Theyyam talk about the dependency of human beings on each other and respect for people's human values apart from their religious identity. Therefore, the North Malabar community is still promoting these kinds of traditional art forms in this modern world order as people believe that it is very necessary to preserve these traditional rituals to maintain harmony and solidarity in the society, which is diluting in the contemporary scenario (Manorama News, 2017).

Mappila Theyyam: Theoretical Insights

The mythical narratives of Mappila Theyyam are transformed through generations using oral mediums. To explore the nuances of Mappila Theyyam's narratives, the researcher analyzed the key methods proposed by Alan Dundes for folklore and narrative analysis. Dundes' concept of "multiple existence and variation" posits that folklore exists in multiple versions rather than a single "original" form (Dundes, 1965). This could be analyzed in Mappila Theyyam as folklore based on its different mythical stories and variations.

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For example, the story behind the myths of Kalandan Mukri's Mappila Theyyam is found in two or three versions. Therefore, we cannot stick to one story; instead, each one could be analyzed to better understand the art performance. Dundes points out that there is a "chain of transmission" in oral traditions (Dundes, 1965), where different people convey these stories to the next generations with their versions. Thus, the local cultural contexts come into play, which Dundes called "ecotypes." This means the different versions or types of folktale mutations have evolved independently, resulting in variations in the narrative structure and plot (Dundes, 1965). The narrative analysis methods in folklore emphasize the importance of considering the social context in which folklore is shared, including factors such as when and where stories are told, who tells them, and audience participation, to understand the cultural significance and functions of narratives (Dundes, 1965). For example, Manavarma Raja, a member of the royal family, Nileswaram, commented on a Mappila Theyyam: "In my view, those who die unexpectedly in Northern Kerala are believed to rise as Theyyam, whereas in the South those who have unnatural death become ghosts" (Manorama News, 2017). This is an "ecotype" that is developed further by the viewers of this news telecast. All these lead to different kinds of social cohesion as they all convey the relevance of the coexistence of human beings.

Mappila Theyyam shows the elements of solidarity through the combined Theyyam performance with a Hindu deity, where we could find the presence of "communitas," a concept introduced by Victor Turner. He points out that "communitas is an existential quality that transcends structured society, emphasizing relationships and connections among individuals in a sacred and liminal state" (Turner, 1966). The researcher analyses how communitas works in Mappila Theyyam to explore the nuances of it. Mappila Theyyam is performed with a Theyyam (Hindu God) in that locality, where both of them interact and perform together to convey the messages of social harmony. Karichamundi (*theyyam*) and Kalandan Mukri are the famous Mappila Theyyam found in North Malabar. Here, both perform in front of Kamballoor Kotta *Tharavadu*. When Mukri starts the *Theyyam* performance with *Adhan* and *Namaz*, he then approaches Karinchamundi to ensure *Chamundi* is ready. Both of them get greetings from the *Tharavadu Karanavar* (eldest member). *Mukri* wears a red shawl on the head and a red dhoti on the bottom. He has a *Dandu* (sword) and a *Paricha* (shield), and *Chamundi* appears in the usual *Theyyakkoalm* (*Theyyam* with costume). Once the performance progresses, both start to fight with each other, later take a few minutes for conversations, and end with mutual dance performances. These conversations are the essence of Mappila Theyyam's performances. It is found that a community bond is created among them, which breaks down the social barriers through shared experiences. In addition, this will have a great impact on the community that observes this performance, as long-term liminal experience spreads to them while this Theyyam blesses the community. Thus, social bonds are strengthened further. A collective memory develops among the North Malabar society through Mappila Theyyam as people from diversified communities participate and engage in the performance. Consequently, there is a breakdown in social barriers, and intentional efforts are made to continue these practices, as K M Naseer points out: "This is a space that allows people to join hands together and maintain the social unity among diversified communities" (Manorama News, 2017). In short, the researcher observes Mappila Theyyam's performance, which acts as a space for building trust and understanding, where a shared cultural identity is created, which stimulates the daily interactions that allow working together among the people in North Malabar.

Mappila Theyyam performances serve cultural functions in North Malabar society, as social messages delivered during the performances educate people on the relevance of communal harmony and coexistence. Therefore, the researcher posits that Mappila Theyyam emphasizes the social identity of the North Malabar

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community as it emphasizes cultural syncretism and religious integration. For example, Karinchamundi asks *Mukri*, “*Evidenno then thionin video ethic, video ippo sugamalle? Santhoshamalle?*” (after wandering a lot, you reached here. Are you happy here?). *Chamundi* wants to ensure that *Mukri* receives enough things to live happily. Once he agrees that everything is going smoothly, they both start to dance together. This conveys the message of care towards fellow human beings as he is a guest for them. In short, Mappila Theyyam acts like a mirror of North Malabar's social culture, thus reflecting the unique sociocultural synchrony. As detailed already, North Malabar's multicultural habitus with an accommodative nature is reflected in the Mappila Theyyam as it picturizes local social structure and relationships. Therefore, the community values of cooperation and collaboration are embodied in this art performance.

Mappila Theyyam promotes cultural syncretism through the appearance of performers. The religious integrity in North Malabar is promoted through the symbolic acknowledgments of Muslim community practices in Mappila Theyyam. In addition, Mappila Theyyam appears in traditional Muslim attire, such as green garments, white head caps, and white dresses, and some of these performers wear red cloth on the bottom as well as a red-colored crown like Kalandan *Mukri* and Aalikkutti *theyyam*. This shows the blend of religious elements from both communities. Furthermore, the performance uses Arabic words like "Allahu Akber" (God is Great) as well as Hindu mantras for protection from God, which justify the extensive use of both religious symbols. When people stand in a sacred place, they accept the blessings and share *Prasadam* and *Dhakshina* (religious offerings to the Hindu God) from Mappila Theyyam, although they perform Muslim rituals like *Aadhan* and *Namaz*. Consequently, an inclusive ritual space is created in the Mappila Theyyam ground as there is a transformation of the traditional Theyyam ground to perform some other religious activities. Therefore, we could find the shared maintenance and protection of the performance venue as there is a collective spiritual experience. Hence, the researcher posits it as a combined purification process from both traditions while adopting Muslim elements in Hindu ritual preparations.

In the current religious tension and communal segregation of people, Mappila Theyyam significantly promotes social cohesion and syncretism. The Mappila Theyyam evolved naturally in North Malabar, as the sociocultural situations nurtured and accommodated diversity by looking into the values of humanity. People did not make any distinctions based on religion; they simply followed these rituals as part of their daily lives as they were transferred to them. Therefore, the researcher argues that in earlier times, highlighting these events as symbols of social harmony was unnecessary, as there was no disharmony among communities, with people valuing others simply as fellow human beings. However, religious distinctions have gradually increased in the country, which is also reflected in North Malabar. Nevertheless, the researcher observes that North Malabar society continues to maintain social harmony and cohesion due to the impact of these symbolic cultural events. Therefore, Mappila Theyyam's performance provides a platform for interfaith dialogue and building community resilience through shared cultural practice.

Present-day examples of social coexistence in North Malabar can be drawn from multiple events other than those in Mappila Theyyam. The Vishnu Moorthi *theyyam*, from Cheemeni, Perumbatta, Kasargod district of Kerala, performs at Vadarkulangara *Bhabagavathi* temple. This *Theyyam* visits the Juma Masjid to bless people and talk to the Masjid *Khazi* (one who leads the prayers): “*Anekam perittu vilikkumennu varikilum prapancham paripalichu pokunna daivan onnu thanne. Alle ente Maadayi nagarame?*” (However, we call God by different names; the one who controls the entire world is the same. Isn't it, my dear Muslim brothers?). Here, Theyyam uses *Madayi Nagarame* to denote the Muslim community. The Theyyam continues: “*Niskaramachu neravum pirakundu perunnalum vrathangalumaayi deeninte vazhi mudatheettu*

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thakkavannam margam nadathunnundallo?” (I hope your five times prayers, Eid, and Fasting, etc., are going well) (Menon, 2021). Here, Theyyam ensures people live happily and continue their religious life properly. The Vishnu Moorthi Theyyam promotes interfaith understanding and successful religious coexistence, which could be a counter-narrative to religious extremism. Another current example from North Malabar of its communal harmony is the Payyannur Subramaya Swami temple receiving sugar for the festival from Keloth Muslim *Tharavadu*, a tradition that continues from their ancestors (Menon, 2021). The role of the Arakkal Royal Family (The only Muslim royal family in Kerala) in Manikoth temple festivals continues as they are invited to be present at the *Kodiyettam* (a symbolic event denoting the beginning of the festival) (Shihad, 2017, February 11). This shows the spirit of fostering an inclusive social environment that ultimately leads to bridging the generational gap in maintaining traditional values in modern society.

Mappila Theyyam performances are also facing challenges in the modern social scenario, such as diluting the values of traditional knowledge and heritage preservation. The researcher claims that Mappila Theyyam is losing its presence as *Mappila Porattu* dominates. Mappila Porattu is a similar kind of art form, where two people enter the Theyyam ground with Muslim attire like a Musaliar (who teaches religious text); once they finish *Aadhan* and *Namaz*, they start interacting with Theyyam. The interactions include many sarcastic dialogues, which entertain the audience. Later, they collect *Dakshina* (something given to the deity to please God) from the audience (Daivikam, 2024). In comparison to Mappila Theyyam, *Mappila Porattu* does not perform the Theyyam together with the Hindu deity, but they just accompany the Theyyam and help it in the performance (Ok media Malayalam, 2024).

Another challenge is the socio-economic conditions and diversified job opportunities that have made the new generations move away from these traditional commitments, creating a scarcity of Mappila Theyyam performers. According to Ambika Sudan Mangad, a famous writer in Malayalam: “Today, People from rich family backgrounds conduct Theyyam performances in their family temple to show their status and wealth, but they do not follow the ritualistic aspects of Theyyam, thus losing its perfect forms” (MediaOne Lite, 2014). Mappila Theyyam, like other traditional art forms, faces similar challenges in the modern social order. There are people and communities in North Malabar who preserve these traditional art forms, but more efforts need to be made to preserve these kinds of rich heritage.

Conclusion

This paper on Mappila Theyyam focused on the contemporary relevance of Mappila Theyyam in creating social harmony in North Malabar society. The researcher points out how the sociocultural nature of North Malabar is accommodative of diversified communities and their beliefs; thus, Mappila Theyyam is just one of its outputs. Mappila Theyyam's performances demonstrate an organic cultural fusion through ritual practices as they provide a space for integrating the Hindu-Muslim elements in this traditional art form. This creates a "communitas" in North Malabar society as the performances pass the essence of social cohesion among the audience, thus leading to long-standing interfaith dialogue within the community. The researcher found that this shared cultural space transcends religious boundaries and creates a collective identity through performance tradition. Furthermore, the community involvement in maintaining these ritual forms highlights the importance of preserving the core elements while embracing change in society. This paper emphasizes the significance of cultural studies using the theoretical framework of Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas in multi-religious contexts and the application of Dundes' folklore framework to living traditions. Consequently, it exposes the importance of cultural preservation in modern contexts.

For a long time, the Mappila Theyyam performance has been a normal ritual in North Malabar.

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However, the relevance and contemporary significance of this art form are highlighted in this paper, as it is necessary for the current sociocultural scenario. Therefore, the preservation and maintenance of these age-old traditional rituals are necessary to ensure social cohesion and provide a template for building community relationships. Furthermore, their preservation will lead to cultural heritage studies and the maintenance of our rich traditional knowledge. Finally, this paper opens up new academic discussions on comparative studies of similar traditions, which will create awareness of traditional art forms and their impact on the social fabric.

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