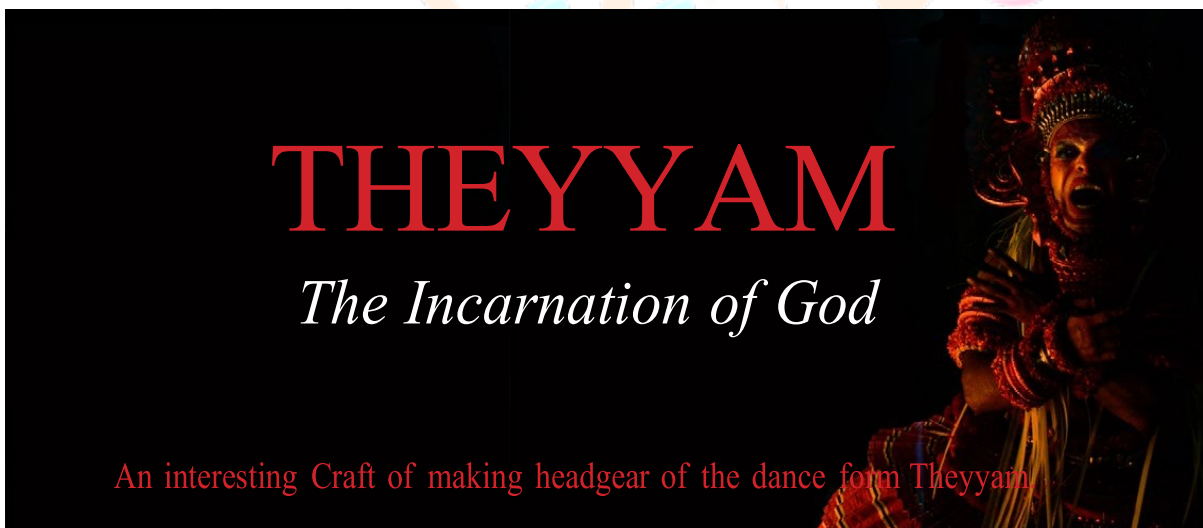




# Exploring the Cultural Significance and Artistry of Theyyam's Elaborate Headgear: An In-depth Study of Craftsmanship and Symbolism.”

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## Abstract –

This research paper aims to delve into the cultural significance and symbolism of Theyyam, also known as Kaliyattam, a traditional ritualistic dance form practiced in northern Kerala, India. The paper will examine the elaborate costume and appearance of the character, which adheres to age-old ritualistic prescriptions. Additionally, it will explore the use of huge masks painted.

## Key words –

Theyyam, Dance, Kerala, Headgear, Rituals, Culture, India, Craft, Headgear making.

## Aims and Objective –

### Aims:

- To have a thorough knowledge of craft and its meaning.
- To develop the understanding of “Theyyam” the ritualistic dance form of Kerala and people associated with it.
- To learn more about the design aspects involved with it, in terms of performing, costumes – specially

ornaments and headgear, makeup and other rituals.

- To capture the different stages of the dance form.
- To understand the complexity of the making process of the headgear.

### Objective:

- Understanding The religious dance of Kerala is known as Theyyam.
- Visit the location, live there, and engage with those directly or indirectly involved.
- Learn about the trade from artisans who have carried on this dancing tradition and from those who have been involved in the production of decorations, clothing, and headwear for many years.
- Examine the components used to create headgear and other decorations, and record each stage of the manufacturing process.
- Interact with artists, performers, and others involved in this dance genre to learn about their backgrounds and experiences.
- Give a brief historical account of the skill and its cultural importance.
- To improve knowledge, show the craft's production documentation, such as images, videos, or diagrams.
- Summarize the research results and judgments on the craft clusters and the actual craft.

Your research paper about Theyyam and all of its associated topics can be built upon these goals and objectives.

### Hypothesis –

The goal of the qualitative portion of the current study is to investigate Kerala's Theyyam, a ceremonial dance form, and all the factors that are related to it, such as the way of life, the sources, and the work of the artisans. The following might be the study paper's premise:

H1: "The brahmin community alone is linked with the dancing style known as Theyyam, performed inside the temple grounds. This study article aims to reveal the hidden tales, myths, and beliefs as well as the actual design elements associated with the dance form through an in-depth examination of the dance form, which includes interactions with performers, priests, townspeople, and craftspeople linked to this dance form."

### Introduction –

#### Craft

Craft refers to any activity that involves turning raw materials into finished goods utilizing specific kinds of skills, whether entirely by hand or with the aid of extremely simple tools employed in local and traditional methods. A group of persons known as "Crafts Persons" engage in these activities as their primary source of income.

Indian traditional crafts are the kinds of crafts that are now being practiced there. It is a practice carried out by a community that has been handed down through the generations, comprising information, skills, techniques, and experience. Each craft reveals the distinctiveness of its own culture and talks about how it reflects the nature and wildlife of the area in which it is produced. They use the craft they do as a way to support themselves financially and get respect from their community.

This article focuses on the headpiece used during the Theyyam dance performance. The intricately large and exquisite embellishment on the headgear is a feature of their dancing attire. The dancing style, known as Theyyam, originates in Kerala's northern region. There are certain parallels between the sacred dance of Theyyam and Kathakali, another type of dance from Kerala. Both dancing styles make extensive use of face painting and highly ornamental clothing and headgear to portray distinct personalities during performances.

As compared to Kathakali, which is a theatrical performance that was once performed in temples to teach people about the Puranas and the Vedic literature, Theyyam is a dance performed as a ritual outside the temple. Theyyam is a caste-specific art genre, whereas Kathakali was formerly performed by Brahmins but is now open to all performers.

## *Theyyam - As Craft*

Hindu ceremonial worship, known as Theyyam, is quite common in Kerala's North Malabar area. It incorporates nearly all of the castes and classes of the Hindu faith in this area and is a live cult with numerous thousand-year-old traditions, rituals, and customs. Tribal groups, including the Malayar, Pulayan, Vannan, and Velan, make up the cast for this magnificent dance genre. According to the Indian caste system, they fall within the caste/tribe category. This tribe's participants in the dance performance are not well-educated.

The Sanskrit term "Daivam," which means divine or heavenly, is where the name "Theyyam" originates. An exuberant dance is done in honour of Shiva, Vishnu, and Kali. With the aid of the clothes, especially the headpiece, the performer takes on a larger-than-life presence. This performance art style, which is based on fervent religious beliefs, makes use of storylines that are developed via a combination of singing, chanting, and dance. The performer himself created the narrative. A deity is represented by each character in the story. The character's attire and outward appearance adhere to long-established ceremonial rules.



In Kerala, there are about 400 Theyyam performances. The most impressive of them are Raktha Chamundi, Kari Chamundi, Muchilottu Bhagavathi, Wayanadu Kulaveni, Gulikan, and Pottan. The complete outfit displays the influence of the area's sculptural art traditions as a three-dimensional sculpture in motion. The frame of the most important accessory, the mudi (headgear), as well as the lower garments, are made of lightweight materials like bamboo and wood from the areca nut palm. Additionally, decorations are made from the wood of the areca nut palm and the coconut tree. Additionally, marmula (breastplates) for female performers as well as the masks used by the fearsome characters are made from areca nut wood.

**Also called Kaliyattam,  
Theyyam is characterized by huge masks painted bright red or orange, which can appear to be quite terrifying.  
This dance form is practiced in northern Kerala and includes mime, music, dance, and fortune-telling in a ritual performance that sometimes leads to the performer entering a trance-like state.**

### *Training*

There are several areas in Theyyam art where an artist might specialize, similar to many other performing arts. An accomplished artist typically masters each of these disciplines. They are dancing, getting ready, constructing costumes, playing instruments, and chanting the Theyyam song, or Thottam. There are around 100 Thottam songs dedicated to various gods and goddesses. The tales, myths, and customs associated with their particular folk deities are included in some of them, which are large volumes. The musician has to commit these songs to memory. 'Varavili' and other oral revelation techniques are mastered. The ragas, or melody, change depending on the situation. The artist must thus have some understanding of music.

**"Theyyam artists belong to a socially degraded group, but at the time of the performance  
They are elevated to the status of God and worshipped."**

### *The Stage*

Theyyam is often performed in front of the village shrine since it is a dance to invite the gods and goddesses in order to ask for their grace. Extensive ceremonies and rituals are also practiced in homes for ancestor worship. The individual who wishes to have a Theyyam performance relies on the performance location as well.



The concert won't have a stage, curtains, or any other furnishings. In front of the shrine, the followers would be arranged in an open theater, either standing or sitting around the sacred tree. Depending on the importance and rank of the god within the shrine, the complete performance of that deity may last anywhere between 12 and 24 hours.

All of the rites feature the primary dancer, who mimics the shrine's main god. This specific dancer will also fast the rest of the day once the sun sets. Specialists and other dancers do his makeup.

**“It is believed that the dancer then gradually metamorphoses into the deity of the shrine.”**



### *Types of Theyyam*

Theyyam describes those who died in war, the suffering of ladies who killed themselves, or people who were murdered by the local chiefs. Theyyams, rituals held in front of shrines, are used to commemorate these heroes or gods.

The drummers and the dancer chant a specific ceremonial song that tells the stories and traditions of the shrine god or the folk deity that is to be worshiped. The dancer approaches the shrine and transforms into the specific god of the shrine over time. There are around 450 variants of Theyyam that are known, and each has its own tale and distinctive costumes, make-up, dancing, and musical selections. The most impressive of them include Muttapan, Raktha Chamundi, Kari Chamundi, Muchilottu Bhagavathi, Wayanadu Kulaveni, Gulikan, and Pottan.

### **Methods –**

#### *Getting Ready*

As the artist prepares and the deity's spirit is summoned at night, Theyyam is performed in the courtyard of a home or village temple. Each Theyyam's clothing is unique and painstakingly constructed, including the hood, headpiece, face painting, breastplate, bracelets, garlands, and fabric. This archaic ceremonial art, also known as Thirayattam (since every thira or hamlet performs it at the local temple), necessitates much preparation.

A Theyyam is simply decorated above the wearer's waist. The Theyyam is left plain below the waist, with the exception of covering the area with starched material to give it an exquisite circular form. Costume materials are readily and naturally accessible in nature. The essential ingredients are tender coconut leaves, rice powder ('arichattu' for the white color, 'Kari' for the black color, and turmeric for the yellow hue). Additionally, other combinations of these fundamental hues are employed. Each hue embodies a distinct meaning and idea.

Areanut and light soft-wood planks of "murik" are typically utilized for the fabrication of headdresses. The standard components for Theyyam cosmetics are flowers, colored clothing, and coconut leaves. The use of decorations and flowers is a crucial component of the Theyyam performance. The majority of the decorations are "murik," or soft wood, and coconut leaves. The larger necklace and ears are constructed of soft wood and covered with golden paper. It should be noted that in Kerala, the decorations used in Theyyam performances have become standard equipment for other performing arts. Due to acculturation and social hierarchical supremacy over Theyyams, this impact exists. The headpiece contains Theyyam's soul. The primary deity is installed in the 'Kottam' or holy grove ('Kavu'), and the crowning ritual ('Mudiyettu') is performed there. Singing and dancing are performed in a sombre setting. The Theyyam succeeds the Mudiyettu as god.

## Materials

The headgear and the costume of the Theyyam is constructed out of all naturally occurring materials.

### Bamboo sticks/cane:

Used for making basic armature.

### Mayilppeeli (peacock feather) :

Use of peacock feathers is seen almost in every headgear of theyyam. It is used to form the final border or the circumference of the mudi

### Kuruthoola (tender coconut leaves):

Coconut leaf sections used for making floral motives.

### Eerkili:

Thin stems on the coconut leaves with a diameter of just two millimeters are used to fix the cloth on the armature.

### Chekkipoov (flowers):

Small sized orange-colored flowers are used for the decoration of the headgear as well as for making of the ornaments for the dancer.

### Cloth (silk and cotton):

Cloth is the basic necessities in the costume. It is provided by the temple. It is also used to cover the armature of the headgear.

### Wood:

Murik wood is used to create some parts of the head gear. Rarely, but at times the entire headgear is made of this wood.

### Jute rope:

Used to tie up the armature.

### Decorative Motifs:

Made up of silver, gold and brass are used on the headgear and for the ornamentation also.



## The Makers

### The Blacksmith:

Few blacksmiths specialize in producing weapons for the Theyyam. Because Theyyam weapons are considered to be sacred by gods and goddesses, the craftsman who makes them must be fully aware of the Theyyam for whom he is constructing them. Each Theyyam carries a unique weapon that has a symbolic purpose. These weapons have been produced with the same shape and construction for many years.

Making the weapon is a ceremonial art that is regarded as sacred. These weapons were developed separately and are said to have divine power because they are the god's weapons. It's thought that if anybody other than the blacksmith witnesses the weapons being made, they lose their Divine status. Once done, they are covered with a cloth and only unwrapped during the Theyyam.



### The Wood Worker:

Wood forms an integral part of the entire costume of the yam. Wood is used to make parts of the headwear, shields, and decorations for the neck, arms, and waist. The Theyyam costumes are constructed from coconut shells that have been sliced and painted in black, white, and red designs. Fresh coconut fronds are used to make skirts. Dry coconut shells are used to make breasts. A red fabric is tied around the waist.



The frame of the most important accessory, the mudi headpiece, as well as the lower garments, are made of lightweight materials like bamboo and wood from the areca nut palm. Ornaments are made from areca nut and coconut palm wood. Marmula, breastplates for female performers, and the masks often worn by those characters seen as aggressive are also made from areca nut wood.

**Ornaments:****Oolakaant**

Worn on both sides of face. Made by using wood & decorating with chekkipoov, brass/ silver.

**Thalathanda**

Bunch of chekkipoov, nicely tied in special method by using natural thread like banana fiber. Worn just above Thalappali.

**Thalappali**

A very important ornament worn on forehead made of 21 brass pieces. These 21 brass pieces represent 21 gurus.

**Chennippoov**

Flower made up of silver/brass worn on both side of face over Oolakaant.

**Poikkann**

An elliptical shaped semi globe cover worn on the eyes. Made of brass / silver. Theyyam has to view the surrounding through the hole having just the diameter of one millimeter.

**Ekir**

Represents teeth- made of silver / brass.

**Arimbumaala**

Thick red cloth having width about 10 cms decorated with pearl, silver/ brass. This connects the two 'Oolakaant' on oth sides of the face. In the zoomed view, the background is the close-up of the same.

**Kazhuthilkett**

A special garland with designs made of tiny pieces covering neck.

**Eyyaaram**

Wide golden colored ornament with beautiful carvings made of small pieces covering the chest.

**Choodakam**

A special bangle made of brass/silver.

**Poothanda**

Nice bangle made of chekkipoov. The theyyam plucks the chekkipoov and will present it to the worship while blessing them.

**Munkaivala**

Special bangle with beautiful design made of wood worn just above 'Choodakam'.

**Nanthakam**

Special sword with design made either by using, iron,brass/silver/gold- The sacred weapon of theyyam.

**Cheedakam**

Sacred shield with nice designs, made either by using, iron,brass/silver/gold- The sacred weapon of theyyam.

**Pattupaadakam**

Brass ornament fixed on red cloth bordered by small sea-shells.

**Chilamb**

A special jingling ornament worn on both ankles. Made of brass one. One 'Chilamb' weighs one and ahalf kilograms to two kilograms.



### *And It Starts*

Most of the time, rituals turn into a culture's symbolic acts. The ritual's action component takes on the expressive level of the symbol. The character of the Theyyam myth affects how the rites are performed. However, there is a similar framework across all Theyyam ceremonies. The diviner uses lunar calculations to identify the precise day of the event. A Theyyam's "performance" is always preceded by intricate pre-performance rituals. Certain deities are originally worshiped through the tōttam, or song ceremony, in which the artist performs the song that tells the deity's myth and the beginnings of his or her connection to the specific shrine while typically donning only a modest costume and minimum makeup.

The elathalam and kuzhal (shawms, oboe-like instruments), as well as the chenda and veekuchenda (drums), were utilized during the performance. A vellattam, or vigorous ceremonial dance, is necessary for the most combative warrior gods and frequently includes a stunning exhibition of martial arts.

The performer will not be dressed as a real deity until these preceding ceremonies have been completed. Once the artist is seated on a holy stool in front of the sanctum, the mudi, or headpiece, which is the most sacred and potent component of the outfit, is put on him. The performer then looks into a tiny hand-held mirror when the real "becoming" of the deity, the moment of crossing the boundary, occurs. His eyes expand as they shift from focusing on his own reflection to the mysterious characteristics of a heavenly entity at this very moment, when he almost imperceptibly slips into another state of existence.



Theyyam represents the common man's spiritual and metaphysical beliefs as it encompasses the opportunity where the performer identifies with the gods and goddesses, the spirits of the ancestors or bygone heroes.

## International Research Journal

### *The Headgear – Armature Making*

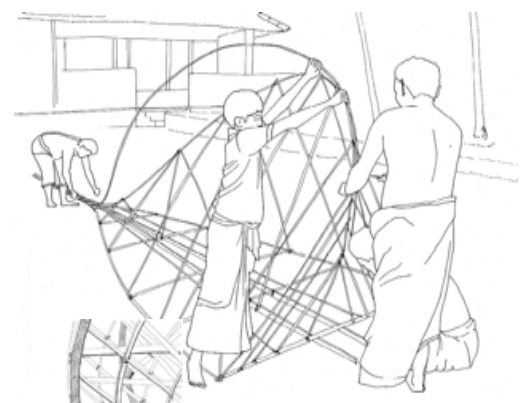
The armature making plays the important role in Theyyam. As the artist or the performer has to hold the weight of the headgear. So, it is very much important to think about the size and the weight of the headgear and accordingly the number of the bamboo and cane sticks is to be considered.

#### **Joinery:**

It is to be taken care that the joining of the armature is very well done so that there are no chances of breakage and loosening of the armature while performing.

#### **First Layer of Cloth:**

Once the armature is ready, the artisans start putting up the cloth on the headgear. The joining of the cloth to the armature is done by 'EERKILI' (thin stems on the coconut leaves with a diameter of just two millimeters).





### Ornamentation of the Headgear

The headgear and other ornaments that are clad on the performer's body are huge in size and appearance. After putting the basic cloth all over the armature, artists start putting up all the motifs and decorations on the headgear. The motifs and decorations depend on the Theyyam it is being made for.

Once the headgear armature is made, it lasts for years. The armature is stored and used again and again every year for performance. It might need a little bit of repair and maintenance a few days before the performance. The decoration, the cloth from the headgear and other costumes, and the ornaments are also kept safely in the bags for the next performance.



*The performance of Theyyam starts much before we actually see it.*

*The Theyyam performance starts with the making of the headgear. It is the most essential and time-consuming part of the performance. Almost everyone from the group is involved in this. The performers themselves do this job.*

*It starts with the making of the armature for the headgear, which is followed by covering the armature with cloth. Once the base of the headgear is completed, it is then decorated with motifs corresponding to the deity. These decorations are done using flowers, coconut leaves, gold, silver, brass plates, etc.*

### Costume and Makeup

The very attractive features of theyyams are its colorful costumes. The makeup involves very accurate face painting of different styles and body decoration. The hierarchy of gods, goddesses, heroes, demons, spirits, and other mythical beings is personified in the plays. Although there is no fundamental difference in the costumes and make-up of these theyyams, each category of theyyams varies from the other categories in accordance with the main characteristics.



The typical waist dress of heroes is found in Kathivanur Veeran, which is made out of splices of bamboo and covered by red cloth. The theyyams, like Theechamundi, Pottan Theyyam, and Uchitta, wear waist dresses woven out of coconut leaves as they leap into the fire. Above the waistdress, the naked body is painted with different native colors. The particular system of painting the body of a theyyam differs from that of other theyyams. The body of Velltam is usually smeared with a paste made from rice and turmeric.

The players' faces are painted using certain procedures. The "Mudi," or headdress, varies with each theyyam. These are constructed with wooden planks and bamboo splices that have been decorated with flowers and coconut leaves. Peacock feathers are also utilized on occasion. Kshethrapalan's theyyam and those of a few Bhagavathies employ lengthy, nearly fifty to sixty-foot-tall crowns built of areca nut trees and bamboo splices. When put on the player's head, these crowns are balanced by means of long bamboos that are carried by a number of assistants.

These lengthy crowns are thatched with coconut leaves or wrapped with colorful fabric, depending on the local customs. A silver diadem shaped like a miniature serpent's head and decorated with red flowers is worn by some



theyyams of the Bhagavathies. Some pieces have a large golden collar that has been intricately carved from wood and adorned with priceless diamonds. The female goddesses have a wooden breast and wear jewels. Wooden planks are utilized in a few theyyams, such as the pottan theyyam mask constructed from areca nut tree leaves. Typically, goddesses' breasts are adorned with sparkling jewelry and a makeup technique known as "Ezhutharam" (seven models). Theyyam wear little anklets on their feet and bangles known as "Katakam" and "Chutakam" on their arms. In the case of Bhagavathies in Roudra Mood (fearful appearance), torches are appended to the waist, and the crown produces a terrible appearance.

### Issues and Concerns:

For three months of the year, Theyyam artist is worshipped as God when he is performing the ritual in the temple, but then in March, when the season ends, they pack away their costumes, And after that, they go back to their daily work. Even Brahmins also worship them during a Theyyam, touching their feet, kneeling before them for a blessing, and after that they won't even be recognized by people. By the growing economy race the craft has come to a level where the younger generation is not wishing to learn and pursue the craft further.

Theyyam is the most exhausting. A dancer cannot eat properly or go to sleep after dark during the season because they are out dancing virtually every night. They are blessed by God, and thus manage to gather courage. Theyyam dancers have a relatively short lifespan; the majority pass away before turning fifty.

When working as a worker, they sweat blood on the ground or in the well shaft, but when participating in theyyam, they invest their body, mind, soul, and heart. It is psychologically taxing as well. No matter how depressed and hopeless the Theyyam artist may feel on the inside, he cannot display it on his face as he leaves for a performance. When he arrives in a community, he must look joyful and should promote goodness and goodwill.

### Discussion:

Theyyam is a type of ritualistic dance. The purpose of the dance is to manifest heavenly force on earth and to bless other beings. Here are the artist's creations, including the headwear and costumes. The fact that the dancers' ensemble manufactured their own costumes and hats was a rather unexpected discovery.

Theyyam adheres to a set of norms and guidelines that are quite stringent. No one plays around when it comes to the gods. These regulations are observed and passed down from generation to generation. They are unchanged, and nobody has the power to alter them to suit their personal preferences. Everybody and everything has a predetermined part to perform. Everything is a holy procedure, including the creation of the outfits, accessories, and headwear, as well as the casting of the weapons.

As a dance form, it is simply mesmerizing. Everyone says that god actually does come down to earth into the theyyam, which is just unbelievable. But after seeing the Theyyam performance and speaking to various artisans about their experiences while performing, one can totally understand that it is just beyond any performance. The very fact that for generations, time and again, so many people turn up to see the performance, to worship the theyyam, to seek his blessings, to seek his advice, could just not be people's faith and their belief. It would be a lot more, and that is what Theyyam performance is all about. The aura of the theyyam radiates a certain force of energy and power, which is just not human. It has to be some sort of supreme power.

In God's own country, Kerala, everything seems to be teeming with life, and life spills out from the backyards onto the back waters, the waterways, the wide lagoons, and the overgrown canals. The equalities are the fertile soil from which Theyyam grew, and the dance has always been a conscious and ritualistic aspect of the usual structures of Kerala life.

### Modernization of Theyyam

In earlier times, Theyyam played the roles of both teacher and rescuer. Its magic of make-believe has been lost as a result of society's scientific and economic upheaval. The old culture that sacrificed animals and made offerings to Theyyam in exchange for rain or wealth has evolved since then. It was more of a colorful display

than a ritual performance because of its open-endedness. As a result, Theyyam has seen new technological and technical breakthroughs.

Their makeup also exhibits theatre influences. Makeup artists claim that there have been instances in which they have only been permitted to utilize colors derived from naturally occurring elements. They now employ synthetic hues, which are easily accessible on the market. Theyyam makeup used to be made of disposable materials, but they are now trying to make them more durable. For instance, paint and metal have taken the place of earlier headgears made of soft wood and glitter paper. More robust materials have been used in place of the areca-nut sheath-based "Pottan" and "Gulikan" masks.

The meticulous method for the rigorous drilling of the art of Theyyam has been fading among the younger generation of Theyyam artists. They lack both passion to the ritual craft and single-minded determination. The modern generation only views ritual performance as a part-time work, similar to actors in amateur theatre, in contrast to previous performers for whom it was a full-time career.

Today, it has drawn the social and political realities of the actual world. It has been performed beyond the walls of the temple during tours, Republic Day festivities, and political party events. As a result, some of the theological and philosophical components have been removed, and the emphasis is now placed on the spectacular performance. The Theyyam emblems are still widely used today, particularly by the Marxist Party and Sastra Sahitya Paris.

A sizable portion of the community still preserves and adheres to the tradition of Theyyam, despite the fact that for some it has reduced it to nothing more than a show.

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