When the God Dances: Embodied Performance and Alternative Religious Epistemologies in Theyyam

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Abstract

In many folk traditions of South India, such as Theyyam, the emergence of ritual performance is understood not as a supplement to temple worship but as a response to its insufficiency. This paper argues that Theyyam represents not a lesser or derivative form of religiosity but an alternative cosmology and epistemology — a structured system in which embodiment is the primary mode of knowing, transmitting, and encountering the divine. Drawing on ethnographic, historical, and theoretical scholarship, the paper makes three original arguments: that performance in Theyyam constitutes a juridical archive encoding land rights and community sovereignty; that performance functions as what the paper calls a Double Exposure, the moment of simultaneous maximum ideological assertion and maximum vulnerability; and that the deification of folk traditions — whether through Brahmanical assimilation historically or through cinematic and digital circulation contemporarily — operates as a technology of political control, neutralising the juridical and property claims embedded in the performance by moving them from the political to the sacred domain. The paper concludes by calling for a serious, non-reductive engagement with performance traditions as living systems, arguing for the recognition of multiple religiosities as a historical reality rather than a liberal concession.

I. Introduction: The God Who Will Not Stay in the Temple

In the worldview of Theyyam — the ritualistic performance tradition practiced primarily in the Kannur and Kasaragod districts of north Kerala — temple worship is insufficient. This is not a peripheral or incidental claim. It is structural. The belief embedded in Theyyam is that idol worship and priestly mediation cannot satiate human longing for the divine. Religiosity in this tradition does not culminate in the temple as the highest sacred space; it moves outward from the temple to performance, where rituals transform the human body into the actual dwelling of the god. The term Theyyam itself is a demotic form of the Malayalam word Daivam, designating God, and the tradition is among the oldest on the subcontinent, with references traceable to Sangam literature and documented in its historical dimensions by Rich Freeman in his essay 'The Teyyam Tradition of Kerala' in the Blackwell Companion to Hinduism (Freeman 2003, p. 308).

The Theyyakaran — the performer — is not a symbol of the deity. He is its actual habitation. Divinity here is not fixed, not hierarchically distributed, not the exclusive property of any institution or caste. And because of this, the performance itself becomes archive, memory, and community knowledge simultaneously. The god dances. The god listens. The god answers. The

god remembers who was here first and who wronged whom and what land belongs to whom. This is not metaphor. It is the epistemological claim of the tradition, and this paper takes it seriously.

This paper is a historiographical intervention — a critical overview of existing scholarly lenses through which Theyyam has been studied — read against three original analytical frameworks developed here: performance as juridical archive, performance as Double Exposure, and deification as technology of control. It is situated within a larger doctoral project whose next stage involves primary fieldwork with Theyyakaran communities in Kannur and Kasaragod. The arguments made here are therefore preliminary in the sense of foundational: they establish the conceptual framework that fieldwork will test, refine, and complicate.

The paper argues that Theyyam does not represent a crude or pre-civilisational religiosity with which it is frequently associated by outside observers. It represents an alternative cosmology — not derivative of Brahmanical Hinduism, not lesser than it, but different from it, with its own epistemological architecture, juridical memory, and political authority. What is at stake in taking this seriously is not one tradition among many but the recognition that multiple religiosities are a historical reality — and that the hierarchisation of religious forms, which places temple worship above performance and text above body, is itself a political act with material consequences for the communities whose traditions are thereby subordinated.

Read as a palimpsest — layers of pre-Brahmanical, Brahmanical, colonial, and now digital inscription written over the same performing body — Theyyam reveals how each successive layer conceals, transforms, or destroys something of what came before. The question this paper asks is not whether the tradition has survived. It has, in remarkable ways. The question is what the terms of its survival have cost, and who has paid.

II. Historiographical Review: How Scholars Have Approached Theyyam

The scholarship on Theyyam spans ethnography, performance studies, religious history, and cultural anthropology. This section surveys the major scholarly interventions, identifies what each contributes, and locates where this paper's arguments diverge from or extend existing work.

Rich Freeman and the Historical Framing of Theyyam

Rich Freeman's 'The Teyyam Tradition of Kerala' in the Blackwell Companion to Hinduism (2003) provides the most authoritative historical overview available in English. Freeman situates Theyyam within the territorial context of the Chera kingdom and the Malabar coast, documents its antiquity through Sangam literary references, and traces the politics of its relationship to Brahmanical traditions. He notes that unlike popular understandings of god as eternally divine and aloof, the gods of Theyyam are spirits, ghosts, and local deities who cross the ever-fluid boundary between good and bad, divine and human, multiple times (Freeman 2003, p. 319). Their origin stories are laced with murder, blood, mayhem, and sacrifice, balanced by the kindness they show to the communities they preside over (Freeman 2003, p. 320). Freeman also documents the violence inherent in Theyyams toward authority (Freeman 2003, p. 322) and the

politics of assimilation of Theyyam and low-caste traditions by Brahmanical traditions (Freeman 2003, p. 323).

Freeman's contribution is foundational: he establishes that Theyyam is not a derivative or syncretic tradition but one with its own historical depth, cosmological specificity, and political significance. Where this paper departs from Freeman is in pressing further on the mechanism of assimilation — Freeman describes its politics but does not theorise it as a systematic technology of control — and in connecting the historical assimilation dynamic to its contemporary equivalents in cinematic and digital circulation, which Freeman, writing in 2003, could not have addressed.

Pepita Seth and the Ethnographic Record

Pepita Seth's In God's Mirror: The Theyyams of Malabar represents fifteen years of sustained fieldwork and constitutes the most comprehensive ethnographic documentation of Theyyam available in any language. Seth's work covers the ritual preparation of the Theyyakaran including the vows, austerities, body writing and costuming that precede performance; the five levels of knowledge embedded in the tradition; the moment of Mukha Darshanam in which the performer looks into the mirror and loses all sense of his own personality, becoming only the Daivam (Seth, p. 146); the juridical function of the Theyyam as counsellor and arbiter for devotees who bring their daily sorrows, fears, and anxieties to the deity; the land and forest dimensions of the tradition, including her observation that many forest deities are now homeless (Seth, p. 115); and specific case studies including the Alambady Brahmin Theyyams (Seth, p. 246), the Theyyam of Ali Bhuta (Seth, p. 285), and Nangalankara Bhagavathi (Seth, p. 232).

For a living tradition whose deepest knowledge is embodied, not textualized, Seth's ethnographic record is the closest approximation to a primary source available to a historian working at this stage without field access. This paper treats Seth's observations as data to be read analytically. The interpretive frameworks — Double Exposure, deification as technology of control, performance as juridical archive — are not Seth's. She documents. This paper argues.

One critical limitation in Seth's work, which this paper registers but cannot resolve without fieldwork, is the question of whose voice shapes the documentation. Fifteen years of fieldwork produces intimacy but also selection. What the Theyyakaran communities themselves would say about their tradition's juridical authority, about the threat of displacement, about the politics of Brahmanical assimilation, remains a question this paper holds open for its fieldwork stage.

Krishnan S. Navaneeth and the Endangered Folk Religion

Krishnan S. Navaneeth's 'Revisiting the Endangered Folk Religion of Kerala,' published in the Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, provides a historically grounded argument for the pre-Brahmanical origins of Theyyam and the politics of its encounter with Brahmanical settlements. Navaneeth notes that the territory of Cheras roughly comprised present-day Kerala, where paddy-cultivating plains were the spheres of influence of Brahmin temple corporations, or Brahmadeyas, and that the Brahmin chronicle Keralolpathi mentions thirty-two Brahmin villages in Tulu Nadu and thirty-two in Kerala (Navaneeth, p. 1). This existence of Brahmanical settlements speaks to a direct face-off between religious systems, which resulted in trends of assimilation and simultaneously the need for rigid caste practices — the two parallel and apparently opposite trends that characterise Kerala and South India more broadly.

Navaneeth also notes that even after centuries of colonisation through faith and devotional literatures, the society never generated a Varna system like that of North India, and concludes that as long as evidence does not die, the proof that Dravidians once had a religion and deities of their own can be proved academically (Navaneeth, p. 7). This paper agrees with Navaneeth's historical argument but extends his point about evidence in a critical direction: academia cannot solely exist on secondary source, and proof emerges from existing living traditions. For such studies to stay relevant and useful, it is important that the culture being studied remains alive — which means the question of performance's displacement is not only cultural but epistemological and politically urgent for scholarship itself.

Nimmi Shukla and Tribal Jurisprudence in Kantara

Nimmi Shukla's 'Exploring Bhoota Kola and the Themes of Tribal Jurisprudence, Retribution and Justice Through Divine Intervention in Kantara' provides one of the most analytically useful readings of the relationship between performance traditions and land rights in the contemporary scholarly literature. Shukla argues that the film Kantara's central theme is the conflict between the community's ancestral custodianship of land and the bureaucratic encroachment of the forest department, and that the Bhoota Kola performance is a legal hearing, spiritual rite, and political protest, all at once (Shukla, p. 6), symbolising the re-inscription of moral ecology over the commodified logic of modern environmental law.

This paper's performance-as-juridical-archive argument is directly in dialogue with Shukla's reading, but presses it further in two directions. First, Shukla analyses Kantara as a cinematic representation. This paper argues that in looking at Theyyam and Bhoota Kola deities as pre-modern, outdated reminders of forest rights and justice, what the modern system does is negate the right by giving a sacred, mystical, and thus mythical status to these beliefs — rendering them as what Shukla herself calls beyond the state's comprehension (Shukla, p. 4). This is not neutral reception. It is a continuation of the same deification mechanism by which Brahmanical traditions historically neutralised the political authority of folk traditions. Second, this paper connects Shukla's Kantara analysis to the longer historical pattern of assimilation, arguing that the contemporary dynamic is not new but newly mediated.

Anandita Saraswat, Aratrika Das, and the Decolonial Reading

Anandita Saraswat and Aratrika Das's 'Decolonizing Forest: The Myth of Panjurli and Guliga in Kantara (2022)' focuses on how Kantara circulates Bhoota Kola to Western scholarship and what the consequences of that circulation are. The paper argues that the folklore of Panjurli and Guliga undisciplines the anthropocentric study of religion and registers the erasure of these traditions in Western curriculums (Saraswat and Das, p. 10). This is the crucial contribution of that paper: that the decolonial potential of these performances is simultaneously their most powerful claim and their most easily appropriated element.

Saraswat and Das also acknowledge that in circulation, there is both the threat of appropriation and a value in such films reaching new audiences (Saraswat and Das, p. 2). This paper takes both sides of that observation seriously. The Double Exposure framework developed here argues precisely that these two aspects — the power of wider circulation and the vulnerability it creates — are structurally inseparable. The threat is not an accident of bad filmmaking or

insensitive audiences. It is constitutive of the performance event itself when removed from its geography and cultural corpus.

Dr. Joji John Panicker and the Subaltern Voice

Dr. Joji John Panicker's 'Voice from Void: Subaltern Identity, Psycho-Cultural Sensibility and Caste Parlance in Film Kantara' raises the question of Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) in relation to cinematic representation of Bhoota Kola. Panicker engages with how the cinematic gaze mediates subaltern voices and asks whether Shetty, as an upper-caste director, navigates the tension between ethnographic grounding and romanticisation (Panicker, p. 3). He also reads the performance of Kola depicted in the film as a rage and response to oppression by lower-caste groups (Panicker, p. 4).

This paper's engagement with Spivak moves forward from Panicker's framing. The question can the subaltern speak is a deeply sensitive scholarly engagement with subaltern voice within the institutional frameworks governed by dominant culture — and it remains indispensable. But this paper argues it is now time to move the question forward, not away from Spivak. From 'can the subaltern speak' to 'can we listen and comprehend.' The inability of dominant structures to hear subaltern speech is by design — the dominant system is not a static box but a system that moves, upgrades, and repairs itself to ensure that the voice is not heard. The communities we call subaltern were never subaltern within their own ecologies. Their marginalisation is historically produced. The question 'can the subaltern speak' can, if circulated without the full context of Spivak's argument, inadvertently locate the problem in the subaltern rather than in the structural conditions that silence them. This paper therefore asks: do we even want to listen?

Vijay Nath and the Formation of Hinduism

Vijay Nath's 'From Brahmanism to Hinduism: Negotiating the Myth of the Great Tradition,' published in Social Scientist, Volume 29, Numbers 3-4, 2001, provides the most directly relevant scholarly framework for the assimilation argument. Nath argues that it was the fear of losing ground to more enterprising rival systems which led Brahmanical leaders to unbend from their former elitist stance and take more notice of the needs of people standing on the lower rungs or the extreme periphery of society (Nath 2001, p. 21). He further notes that with Brahmadeyas in hitherto lands of no Brahman contact, after initial responses of violence or segregation, Brahmins would have to come up with socio-cultural trends and methods that gave ample space and even respect to the locals they would want to mobilise as their workforce (Nath 2001, p. 27). There was an urgent need, Nath argues, to recast existent Brahmanism on more liberal lines and reorient it so completely as to become more amenable to the tribal collective ethos as well as become the main frame of reference for them.

Nath's argument directly supports this paper's reading of Theyyam's assimilation dynamic. Where this paper extends Nath is in connecting his historical analysis to the contemporary Kantara controversy — which staged, in public discourse in 2022, precisely the argument Nath has been making academically for decades. Hinduism functions not as a stable defined religious tradition but as a political umbrella term that expands by absorbing what it simultaneously marginalises. When Rishab Shetty claimed Bhoota Kola as Hindu culture and Chetan Kumar responded that these are Moolnivasi Bahujan traditions predating Vedic-Brahmanical Hinduism, the controversy

crystallised Nath's scholarly argument in a form accessible to a mass audience and demanded a response from scholarship.

Gavin Brown and the Theory of Ritual as Performance

Gavin Brown's 'Theorizing Ritual as Performance: Explorations of Ritual Indeterminacy,' published in the journal of performance studies, provides the theoretical scaffolding for the Double Exposure framework. Brown argues that ritual is a declaration of form against indeterminacy, and that indeterminacy is always present in the background of any analysis of ritual (Brown, p. 1, citing Moore and Myerhoff). He further argues that ritual functions as a dynamic and substantive mode of human activity that may be instrumental not only in reflecting but also in generating, reformulating, or challenging cultural values (Brown, p. 1). His formulation that there is no performance without pre-formance, citing John McAloon (1984), is particularly useful for Theyyam: the pre-formance encompasses the narrative, the people, their concerns, histories, and ideas that form the ground of the performance moment (Brown, p. 3). Detaching performance from pre-formance robs the moment of what it actually represents.

The Double Exposure framework this paper develops is in direct dialogue with Brown but argues something he does not. Brown identifies the indeterminacy and generative power of performance. This paper argues that at the moment of performance, a culture is simultaneously at its peak power and its maximum vulnerability — that the assertion and the exposure are not sequential but structurally concurrent. This is a different claim from Taylor's argument about the fragility of the Repertoire, and different from Brown's emphasis on indeterminacy. It is an argument about the political economy of the performance event itself: the exposure is structural, not accidental.

Richard Schechner and the Sublimation of Violence

Richard Schechner's Ritual and Performance provides the framework for understanding Theyyam's handling of violent memory. Schechner argues that ritual sublimates violence — that the function of ritual is to purify violence, to trick it into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals (Schechner, p. 22, citing Girard). He also describes performance as a powerful kind of total theatre and notes the complex role of the audience in giving meaning to a performance event (Schechner, p. 21 and p. 622).

For Theyyam, Schechner's sublimation argument is essential for understanding why the tradition reenacts murder, blood, sacrifice, and caste-based humiliation in its origin stories — not as entertainment but as a ritualised release that allows communities to hold the memory of injustice without that memory collapsing into social breakdown. However, the paper notes an important qualification: the audience of Theyyam is not the generic audience of Schechner's performance theory. It is a local audience with faith in the content and narrative of the performance, participating physically, spiritually, and materially in a way no generic or urban audience does. The direct application of Schechner's paradigms to Theyyam risks what a paper on Kutiyattam by Mundoli Narayanan in TDR (1988-) identifies as the over-ritualisation of performance through Western discourses — the substitution of theoretical framework for the experience and faith that give the tradition its meaning.

III. Methodology and Sources

This paper works primarily through secondary sources and ethnographic writings. The methodological starting point is that performance traditions in India often predate the textual traditions that subsequently claim them. The Keralolpathi — the Brahmanical chronicle whose name means the origin of Kerala, which is itself a misnomer since Kerala and its traditions existed before the arrival of Brahmanical settlers — attributes Theyyam's origins to the sage Parasurama, the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who allegedly granted ritualistic festivals including Kaliyattam, Puravela, and Deivattam to the people of Kerala and allocated Theyyattam to aboriginal tribal communities like Panan, Velan, and Vannan (Navaneeth, p. 1). This allocation claim is itself evidence of the tradition's pre-existing authority. You do not grant what did not already exist. The Brahmanical text's attempt to origin-story a tradition it did not create is the first traceable instance of the assimilation dynamic this paper analyses.

The central source is Pepita Seth's In God's Mirror: The Theyyams of Malabar. The theoretical framework draws on four primary theorists: Diana Taylor's distinction between the Archive and the Repertoire in The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas, which provides the epistemological grounding for treating performance as a knowledge system irreducible to text; Talal Asad's argument in Genealogies of Religion that embodied practice is not expressive of religion but constitutive of it, providing the basis for treating the body as the site rather than vehicle of religious knowledge; Vijay Nath's historical analysis of Hinduism as a negotiated formation in Social Scientist 2001, providing the framework for the assimilation argument; and Rich Freeman's historical scholarship on Theyyam and Brahmanical politics.

The methodological stance of this paper can be stated directly: to read performance as a historical source; to take the tradition seriously on its own epistemological terms rather than subordinating it to frameworks derived from outside it; and to ask not only whether the subaltern can speak but whether dominant scholarly and institutional structures are equipped — or willing — to listen. This last question is both methodological and ethical. It acknowledges that this paper is itself a piece of scholarship produced within institutional structures that have historically marginalised the traditions it studies. The Observer Effect — the act of observing a system causes inevitable changes in that system — applies here. Scholarly attention to Theyyam is not neutral. It is transformative. The question is whether we are honest about what we are doing.

Gavin Brown's point that to understand performance as just the enactment of a script is a reductionist approach (Brown, p. 3, citing Victor Turner) is taken seriously throughout. This paper does not reduce Theyyam to its textual records or ethnographic documentation. It treats the documented evidence as partial and provisional — the outer layers of a knowledge system whose inner layers are, by the tradition's own account, not available to this kind of scholarly access.

IV. Limitations

Three limitations of this paper must be stated directly. First, the dependence on Pepita Seth as the primary ethnographic source means the paper's empirical base is filtered through one

scholar's fifteen years of observation. Seth's documentation is the most sustained available, but it is not equivalent to community consultation. What Theyyakaran communities themselves would say about their tradition's juridical authority, about displacement, about the politics of assimilation — these remain questions for the fieldwork stage. The paper makes analytical claims based on documented material; it does not claim to speak for communities it has not yet spoken with.

Second, the paper does not address the gender dimension of Theyyam in the depth the subject demands. The Theyyakaran communities are all male performers who embody predominantly female deities. That simultaneous inversion of caste and gender — lower-caste men becoming goddess figures — is itself a rich site for analysis, particularly given the conference theme's emphasis on gendering through technologies of embodiment. The paper holds this as an explicitly open question for the doctoral project rather than treating it superficially within the current framework.

Third, the paper's three original arguments — Double Exposure, deification as technology of control, and performance as juridical archive — are stated and illustrated but not fully demonstrated within the scope of a single conference paper. Each is a framework that requires extended empirical testing. The paper presents them as analytical provocations rather than established conclusions, and acknowledges that each will need to be tested against fieldwork evidence, against community perspectives, and against a fuller engagement with the Sanskritisation debate in the existing literature.

V. Conceptual Framework: Three Original Arguments

The Epistemology of Embodiment

Diana Taylor's distinction between the Archive — textual, stable, transferable — and the Repertoire — embodied, performed, particular — provides the analytical foundation for the paper's epistemological argument. Theyyam knowledge lives almost entirely in the Repertoire. Seth's documentation of five levels of knowledge makes this structure visible with precision.

The first level is common knowledge, open to all who attend a performance. The second is held only by practitioners. The third is embedded in the Thottam verses — the long devotional compositions narrating each deity's history, origin, and grievances, accessible only to initiates. The fourth is what the Thanthri, the shrine's supreme authority, acquired when installing the deity, preserved and inherited by his officiating descendants. And the fifth level — the deepest — is what the Theyyakaran himself feels in the moment of becoming the deity. Interior. Incommunicable. Not transferable by any medium (Seth, p. 125).

This fifth level illuminates what Seth calls Mukha Darshanam — the face-seeing. As the Theyyakaran completes his elaborate makeup, accumulated over hours, and looks into the mirror, he loses all sense of his own personality. He does not represent the deity, or perform the deity. He becomes the Daivam. The human identity dissolves. What remains is only the god (Seth, p. 146).

Talal Asad argues that the body is not a vehicle for religion — it is its site. Theyyam has always known this. And it has known something further: the deepest knowledge of this embodied

encounter cannot be extracted from the body without being destroyed in the process. The five levels of knowledge show the architecture of this system. The vows the Theyyakaran takes before performance — celibacy, abstaining from profit, avoiding alcohol and non-vegetarian food, distancing from social gatherings, not entering houses where death or birth has occurred (Seth, p. 135) — are not peripheral rituals. They are the preparation of a body that will become the site of knowledge that no other container can hold.

The tradition's own account of why its deepest knowledge is not shared is revealing: the preservers believe that sharing the knowledge may have an adverse effect on the receiver who might not be able to handle it (Seth, p. 125). This is not obscurantism. It is an epistemological position: that some knowledge requires a certain kind of body, a certain kind of preparation, a certain kind of community, to be received without damage. Scholarship that approaches this tradition as fully available to academic analysis has already missed the point.

Performance as Juridical Archive: Land, Forest, and the Title Deed

The tradition of performing Theyyam in specific forests and sacred Kavus — groves — is not incidental to its cosmology. It is constitutive of it. Seth documents how many forest deities are now homeless as their original performance sites have been cleared or displaced (Seth, p. 115). Nangalankara Bhagavathi — a deity whose Theyyam is performed in a forest under the full moon, who has no shrine and no golden ornamentation, only serpents and the forest (Seth, p. 232) — is a paradigmatic case. The forest is not her setting. It is her dwelling. To remove her performance from the forest is not to change venue. It is to destroy the conditions of her existence.

But there is a historical argument here that extends beyond ecology and into legal history. Performance in a specific forest, around a specific tree, in relation to a specific community's settlement and land, was itself an assertion of land rights. Nimmi Shukla, reading the Kantara controversy, notes that the Bhoota Kola performance becomes an assertion of juridical sovereignty beyond the state's comprehension (Shukla, p. 4). This paper extends that argument historically. The Kaliyattam was the remembrancer of first settlement. The performance encoded what no document recorded — custodianship, sovereignty, the memory of who was here first and why. Where there was no land grant, no inscription, no paper, there was performance.

This is why the Forest Rights Act of 2006, while a significant legal development in acknowledging tribal custodianship of forest land, arrives late to a conversation the tradition has been holding for centuries without legislative permission. The Act recognises what the performance already knew and had been asserting since the first time a community stepped foot in the forest. And this is why displacement of performance from its geography is not a cultural loss — it is the destruction of a title deed. What looks like a ritual being moved to a stage is a juridical archive being dissolved.

The case of Panchuurli, who is associated with one specific aal maram or peepul tree, illustrates this concretely. The performance is not about the tree. The performance in relation to that specific tree is itself the assertion of the community's relationship with that specific land. To film the performance and circulate it without the tree, without the land, without the community, is not representation. It is erasure.

Performance as Double Exposure

This paper's central original contribution is the analytical framework of Performance as Double Exposure. The framework argues that performance is simultaneously the moment of maximum ideological assertion and maximum vulnerability for any cultural tradition — and that these two conditions are not sequential or accidental but structurally concurrent. They are inseparable. The power and the exposure are the same thing.

At the moment of performance, the tradition stakes its claims most forcefully. The Theyyam voices its cosmological authority, its political claims, its property relationships with land, its histories of injustice and sovereignty. The Thottam verses are not decorative poetry. They are juridical documents encoded in embodied form, recited over many hours, heard by the community who knows what they contain and what they assert. As Gavin Brown notes, performance is a dynamic mode of human activity that generates, reformulates, or challenges cultural values (Brown, p. 1). For Theyyam, this generative function is political in the precise sense: the performance produces and reproduces the community's claim to its own history, land, and deity.

But simultaneously — and this is the analytical point that distinguishes the Double Exposure framework from Taylor's Repertoire argument — the performance is the moment of maximum exposure. The rigid script meets the fluid world. Each repetition risks the tradition being misread, omitted, appropriated, or transformed. And it risks something subtler: that the very act of staking the claim publicly exposes it to challenge, to reframing, to the dominant system's capacity to absorb and neutralise. Brown's point that there is no performance without pre-formance (Brown, p. 3) is the obverse of this: the pre-formance — the narrative, history, community knowledge — is what gives the performance its claim. When the performance is separated from its pre-formance, the claim evaporates. The spectacle remains.

Digital circulation is the most extreme form of this double exposure. When a Theyyam performance is filmed, uploaded, and watched by millions who have no access to its Thottam verses, its land history, its juridical memory, its caste politics, its community context — what circulates is spectacle without the claim. Property memory becomes aesthetic content. The Daivam in Malabar becomes a dancer in the media. Saraswat and Das note that such transmission is neither complete nor value-neutral (Saraswat and Das, p. 2). This paper names why: the incompleteness is not a technical failure. It is a structural consequence of the Double Exposure dynamic. The moment of maximum visibility is also the moment of maximum stripping away.

Deification as Technology of Control

The third original argument this paper makes is that the deification of folk traditions — whether through Brahmanical assimilation historically or through cinematic and digital mystification contemporarily — operates as a technology of political control, neutralising the juridical and property claims embedded in the performance by moving them from the political to the sacred domain.

When Brahmanical traditions assimilated a tribal or folk deity into their cosmological framework, the mechanism was typically identification — the deity was renamed, identified with Shiva or Kali or a Puranic figure, sanctified within the Brahmanical system. The tradition was given a place within the elite hierarchy. And in being sanctified, it was simultaneously moved from the political and juridical domain — where it could be contested as a property claim, as a sovereignty assertion, as a community right — into the religious domain, where it could only be

approached as a matter of devotion. Making the tradition sacred removed it from the arena where it held political power.

The two cases from Seth that most clearly illustrate this dynamic are the Alambady Brahmin Theyyams and the Theyyam of Ali Bhuta. In the Alambady Brahmin Theyyams, pre-Vedic and Brahmanical elements have intertwined so deeply over centuries that they are indistinguishable at the level of narrative and ritual. And yet Rakteshwari stands on the wall between the Brahmin and non-Brahmin ritual spaces — a memory of caste lines literally drawn in stone that even a Daivam cannot pass (Seth, p. 246). The ritual assimilates. The wall remains. The cultural boundary is blurred. The social boundary is reinforced. Assimilation renegotiates hierarchy. It does not dissolve it.

The Theyyam of Ali Bhuta presents the second case with greater complexity. Ali Bhuta was a Muslim merchant and sorcerer who, after being slain by Rakteshwari — and only after she persuaded him to remove his Islamic protective amulets, acknowledging the power of his faith — became a Theyyam deity. He was appointed as the karyakkaran, or manager, of the Aivar shrine, where he continues to listen to his devotees and speak with them during his Theyyam. But he is controlled by Padarkulangara Bhagavathi and Chamundi, the two deities who preside over him (Seth, p. 285). Ali Bhuta is inside the system. He is not at its apex. The significance of Rakteshwari killing him only after he removes his amulets is crucial: it is a recognition of Muslim faith and its protective power, embedded within the narrative. The cosmology that produces Ali Bhuta exceeds the Hindu-Muslim binary entirely. It challenges both the Brahmanical claim that all folk tradition is Hindu and the orthodox Islamic idea of a clean conversion that leaves no ritual residue. This is a third thing: a unique religiosity produced by the specific ecology of this region, irreducible to either tradition.

In the contemporary context, cinema and digital platforms perform a structurally analogous operation. When Kantara treats Bhoota Kola as sacred, mystical, and ancient — therefore pre-modern, therefore mythical in the dismissive sense — it renders the tradition as atmosphere rather than argument, as spectacle rather than sovereignty assertion. The land right encoded in the performance is rendered folklore. The property memory becomes cinematic texture. As Nimmi Shukla's analysis of the Kantara controversy reveals, in looking at these deities as pre-modern, outdated reminders of forest rights and justice, what the modern system does is negate the right by giving a sacred, mystical, and thus mythical status to these beliefs. Making it mythical and sacred is a technology — a method used to control who controls the land (Shukla, reading extended by this paper).

In both cases — historical Brahmanical assimilation and contemporary cinematic mystification — the mechanism is identical. The instrument has changed. The outcome is the same: the removal of the folk tradition from the domain where it holds political and juridical power.

VI. The Politics of Assimilation: Exchange, Not Absorption

The standard scholarly framework for understanding the relationship between low-status groups and Brahmanical traditions in India is M.N. Srinivas's concept of Sanskritisation, developed in Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India (1952). Srinivas argues that lower-status groups adopt the practices, rituals, and beliefs of higher-status groups as a mechanism of upward social mobility. The Theyyam case challenges this framework as a fundamentally one-directional account.

Vijay Nath's historical analysis shows that Brahmanical assimilation was never a unilateral decision taken by the elite culture from above. It was a begrudging acceptance — of the political authority, social influence, and economic weight that local traditions held over their communities and regions. What could not be erased was named, placed within the Brahmanical system, and partially contained. As Nath demonstrates, the fear of losing ground to more enterprising rival systems was precisely what drove Brahmanical leaders to accommodate what they could not ignore (Nath 2001, p. 21).

This paper reads this process not as absorption but as exchange of agency — a flow of legitimacy in both directions, across centuries of negotiation whose traces remain visible in the tradition today. Rakteshwari on the wall between Brahmin and non-Brahmin spaces is one such trace. Ali Bhuta as shrine manager is another. The Mapilla Theyyams of Kasaragod — including Aali Theyyam and Aali Chamundi Theyyam (Navaneeth, p. 9) — are a third: Muslim devotional traditions integrated into a Theyyam framework in ways that exceed both Brahmanical Hindu and orthodox Islamic categories.

Even after centuries of assimilation and what Navaneeth calls virtual erasure of local cultic narratives, the tradition produces deities that are not quite Brahmanical, rituals that do not fit Brahmanical definitions, narratives that resist the categories the dominant tradition applies to them. The tug of war between Theyyam deities and Brahmanical tradition has been ongoing since the earliest interactions of the two systems, and these struggles are visible in the way each simultaneously assimilates and draws a line for the other. The author of 'Ritual Liminality and Frame: What did Barbosa see when he saw the Theyyam' notes a contemporary attempt at Sanskritisation of the Theyyam cult — and identifies the same to and fro that has characterised the tradition's relationship with Brahmanical frameworks from the beginning.

This paper argues that assimilation must be understood as a process that goes on for centuries — an exchange, not a one-time event — and that its traces are precisely the evidence of the folk tradition's resistance and political authority. If the Brahmanical tradition had fully absorbed Theyyam, there would be no wall for Rakteshwari to stand on. The wall is evidence of what assimilation could not do.

VII. Contemporary Stakes: Kantara, Digital Circulation, and the Question of Listening

The 2022 film Kantara, directed by Rishab Shetty, brought Bhoota Kola — a ritual performance tradition structurally related to Theyyam, practiced in the Tulu Nadu region of coastal

Karnataka — to a mass national and international audience. The film's commercial success was extraordinary. Its scholarly and political reception was revealing.

When Rishab Shetty stated in an interview that Bhoota Kola is part of Hindu culture and rituals, and that he is a Hindu who believes in his religion and customs which nobody can question, the actor-activist Chetan Kumar responded that Bhoota Kola is not part of Hindu tradition but of indigenous people who are Adivasis, and that it had been hijacked by Aryans who came to India in later years. In a public statement, Chetan Kumar said: 'Our Pambada, Nalike, Parawa Bahujan traditions predate Vedic-Brahminical Hinduism. We ask that Moolnivasi cultures be shown with truth on and off screen' (Indian Express, 2022).

The controversy crystallises the question this paper has been tracing historically: what is Hindu? As Vijay Nath's scholarship demonstrates, the current definition of Hinduism is not the Vedic or Aryan tradition, not even the Puranic Brahmanical tradition in its pure form — it is a political umbrella term, historically constructed through a process of absorption and claim-making that the Theyyam tradition exemplifies. The persistent assimilation of tribal and aboriginal narratives and knowledge systems into Hindu while the term itself has no single or defined meaning tells us that Hinduism functions as a mechanism of cultural claim rather than a stable religious identity. The community whose tradition is claimed as Hindu culture remains socially marginalised within the very tradition that claims them. This is the Double Exposure dynamic operating in real time, in public discourse: identity staking its claim, and that very claim being captured and reconfigured by the dominant framework.

Scholarship has a specific responsibility here. Before labelling folk performance as Hindu, tribal, or subaltern, scholars must understand the historical fluidity of each of those terms and the political work their application performs. As Saraswat and Das argue, the folklore of Panjurli and Guliga undisciplines the anthropocentric study of religion (Saraswat and Das, p. 10). The same is true of Theyyam. It undisciplines the categories through which mainstream scholarship approaches religion, performance, and community. That undisciplining is the tradition's intellectual gift to scholarship, if scholarship is willing to receive it.

VIII. Further Dimensions and Future Research

Several dimensions of Theyyam that this preliminary paper cannot address fully but that the larger doctoral project will develop are worth naming explicitly.

The gender dimension is the most significant gap in this paper. The Theyyakaran communities are all male performers who embody predominantly female deities. The inversion of caste and gender simultaneously — a lower-caste man becoming a goddess figure, a Pulaya untouchable revealed to be Shiva in the case of Pottan Theyyam (Seth, p. 249) — is one of the most analytically rich aspects of the tradition. The conference theme's emphasis on gendering through technologies of embodiment directly invites this analysis, and it will form a central component of the doctoral project.

The internal caste hierarchies within Theyyam itself represent another dimension the paper has addressed only partially. Seth notes that all Theyyams were once considered polluting by

Hindu upper castes, and that there is a caste hierarchy within the Theyyam communities themselves (Seth, p. 59). The differences in rules of addressing others and self-image across Theyyam castes (Seth, p. 62), the fact that even the Daivam deities themselves have caste identities (Seth, p. 64), and the re-enactment of socio-political hierarchies as part of the tradition's ritual content (Freeman, p. 324) — these create a genuine tension. Appreciating and understanding cultural nuances while attempting to ensure a sense of equity in a deeply discriminatory tradition is a challenge that the larger project must address without resolution through simplification.

The question of the low payment to Theyyakarans and the modern media's apathy to the performer — the public's interest in the deity rather than the person who carries it — is raised by Seth (Seth, p. 66) and represents a material dimension of the tradition's contemporary situation that connects directly to the deification argument. When the performer is made invisible by the performance of the god, the same ideological mechanism that renders the tradition sacred also renders the labour of the people who sustain it invisible and therefore underpaid.

The financial strains leading to reduction in days of Theyyam from four to two, and the resulting loss not only of time but of the intricacies, details, and thottam verses now squeezed into reduced time (Seth, p. 238), represent a material dimension of displacement that the paper has not addressed. The reduction of the performance is itself a form of the Double Exposure dynamic: economic pressure produces the same epistemological damage as geographical displacement or digital decontextualisation.

Finally, the testimony of Duarte Barbosa — a Portuguese nobleman who came to India in 1501 and described the Panan caste, known as Malayan in the Malabar area, as practitioners of witchcraft who put the devil in them — represents an early colonial framing of Theyyam that prefigures the contemporary dynamics of misreading and exoticisation (Barbosa, cited in 'Ritual Liminality and Frame: What did Barbosa see when he saw the Theyyam'). The case of Barbosa illustrates how the context of the viewer changes the meaning of what is being viewed — and has always changed it. The contemporary tourist, the digital viewer, the cinema audience, and the Western scholar are in a long line of outside observers who have encountered this tradition through frameworks that are not its own.

IX. Conclusion: Multiple Religiosities as Historical Reality

The Observer Effect in physics states that the act of observing a system causes inevitable changes in that system. This is the condition of every living tradition that becomes an object of scholarly, cinematic, or digital attention. We cannot observe Theyyam without changing it. The question is whether we are honest about what we are doing — and whether what we are doing constitutes the serious, non-reductive engagement the tradition demands and deserves.

This paper has argued three things. First, that Theyyam's knowledge architecture — its five levels of embodied knowledge, the mirror moment of Mukha Darshanam, the Thottam verses encoding juridical memory, the forest as constitutional ground of land rights — constitutes a structured epistemological system that cannot survive textualization without fundamental transformation. To engage with it seriously requires acknowledging that some of its knowledge is

structurally unavailable to the analytical methods this paper uses. That acknowledgment is not a concession. It is epistemological honesty.

Second, that assimilation — whether Brahmanical, colonial, or contemporary cinematic — is not elite power consuming folk tradition. It is negotiation, grudging and incomplete, leaving visible traces everywhere: on the walls between Brahmin and non-Brahmin spaces, in the managed position of Ali Bhuta as shrine manager rather than presiding deity, in the persistence of pre-Brahmanical narrative structures within apparently Brahmanical frameworks. These traces are evidence of the folk tradition's resistance, authority, and refusal to be fully absorbed. They are also evidence of what absorption has cost.

Third, that the forest is the original theatre, and many forest deities are now homeless. Digital circulation and cinematic appropriation are the contemporary version of a much older displacement. The mechanism is the same as it has always been: make the tradition sacred, make it mythical, make it pre-modern — and thereby remove it from the political and juridical domain where it holds power. The Double Exposure framework names this mechanism. The deification as technology of control argument traces it historically. The performance as juridical archive argument locates what is at stake: not culture, but land; not belief, but sovereignty; not religion, but rights.

What Theyyam asks of scholarship is not sympathy. It asks for a genuine reckoning with the possibility that embodied, communal, particular knowledge is not lesser than textual, universalized, priestly knowledge. It is different. And the recognition of multiple religiosities as a historical reality — not a liberal concession but a fact the evidence demands — is the minimum that a non-reductive engagement with this tradition requires.

The god does not remain in the temple. The god dances. And the question of who gets to say what that dancing means is not a cultural question. It is a political one.

> *Can we engage without reducing? Can we listen without simplifying? Those are not rhetorical questions. They are the methodological challenge this tradition poses to everyone who studies it.*

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