

Exploring Human-Wildlife Coexistence in the Theyyam Art of Kerala

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Abstract

This study delves into the fascinating realm of human-wildlife coexistence as depicted within the unique context of *Theyyam* art in Kerala. Theyyam, a traditional art form deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of the region, serves as a powerful medium to explore the intricate relationship between humans and wildlife. The primary objective of this study is to dissect the artistic and symbolic elements present in Theyyam performances that illuminate the harmonious interaction between humans and the natural world. Through meticulous analysis of various Theyyam rituals, costumes, narratives, and folklore, we aim to uncover the profound ecological insights and indigenous wisdom embedded within these artistic expressions.

Our research draws upon interdisciplinary approaches, intertwining anthropology, art history, ecology, and cultural studies. By decoding the messages encoded in Theyyam art, we can decipher how local communities have historically perceived, respected, and coexisted with wildlife. This exploration takes us beyond mere aesthetics, revealing a deep-rooted ethos of sustainability and reverence for the environment. Through engaging visuals and narratives, this presentation offers a journey into the captivating world of Theyyam art. We will showcase how the art form encapsulates stories of deities, spirits, and animals, intertwining human narratives with the natural world. By understanding the cultural nuances, rituals, and beliefs surrounding Theyyam, we will gain valuable insights into the past and present dynamics of human-wildlife coexistence.

Ultimately, this research presentation serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of traditional art forms in shedding light on pressing environmental challenges. By learning from the past, we can derive inspiration and knowledge to inform contemporary strategies for sustainable coexistence with the wildlife that shares our planet, in line with the paradigm shift of human-wildlife coexistence in human-wildlife conflict research globally.

Keywords: *Human-wildlife conflict, Human-wildlife Coexistence, Cultural Belief System, Theyyam, Indigenous*

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Introduction

The traditional societies practised the deification of nature and wildlife, ancestors, warriors, and supernatural characters of legends as stones, objects, and images. Theyyam is a regional ritualistic dance of North Malabar in which the god is taking human form to meet humans and listen to their sorrows. Theyyam is a synonym for *daivam* or god. There are more than 400 varieties of Theyyam recorded, and a similar ritualistic dance form is present in Karnataka also- the *Bhuta kola*. The origin of Theyyam is assumed to be at least 1500 years ago, and the first available evidence of Theyyam is found in the Sangha texts. The Theyyam is performed from November to June every year closely related to the steps of agriculture.

In Theyyam, the god dances with extensive costumes by chanting ballads –*thottam pattu* for Theyyam – which describe the origin story of the particular Theyyam. Playing of Theyyam as an offering is known as *Ketti aadikkal* and is done in the sacred spaces (and sacred groves) called *Sthanam, Kaavu, Mundy, Palliyara, and Madappura*. The communities, people, and houses are conducting Theyyam for the blessings of god to them. The Theyyam performers belong to historically lower castes such as *Vannan, Malayan, Mavilan, Karimpalan, Cheruma, Pulaya*, and more. However, devotees of Theyyam have no caste barrier and Theyyam is one such unique ritual where the upper caste seeks blessings from the lower caste performer. The god brought out to the body of the performer through several steps, both vocal and visual stimuli; *Varavili, Thottam pattu* are the vocal stimuli, and *Mudi vekkel* (mudi-hair accessories), *Ari charthu* (throwing rice on the head of the performer by the shaman) ritual, *Kannadi nokkal* (once the *Kolakkaran* - performer- has put on all the make-up and costumes he check himself in the mirror. Here, the *Kolakkaran* is not seeing himself in the mirror, but the god) are some other steps to bring god into human's body (Namboodiri, 1980).

Classification of Theyyam

The Theyyam ritual has a local origin with close relation with *Shakteyam (Shakti devata)*, however, it has been influenced by *Shaivism* and *Vaishnavism* in the due course of time, and legends of Theyyam have strong elements of these. Each of the Theyyam has unique stories of origin with geographic variations. Many of the Theyyam stories even picture the injustice people had to suffer in the caste-driven society. Many types of Theyyam represent mother goddesses, ancestral gods, warriors, village goddesses, virgin goddesses, nature goddesses, male gods, gods

representing Islamic people, gods who cause and cure particular diseases, forest gods, hunting gods, and animal gods.

Like many of the old traditional societies mother goddess is a popular deity and many of the Theyyam are strong women characters such as *chamundi* (*Karinchamundi*, *Thee chamundi*, *Pula chamundi*, etc.), *Bhagavati* (*Thottum kara bhagavati*, *Kannangattu bhagavati*, *Neeliyar bhagavati*, *Padar kulangara bhagavati*, etc.), *Kali* (*Pulloor/Puliyuru kali*, *Bhadrakali*, *Chudala bhadrakali*, etc.). The virgin goddesses are *Ariya poonkanni*, *Kanni mathe*, *Marakkalathamma*, *Poovilli*, *Muchilottu bhagavati*, etc. The list of ancestral gods and people who became god after death includes *Kandanar kelan*, *Kathivannur veeran*, *Karinthiri Nair*, *Kurikkal Theyyam*, *Kudi veeran*, *Thottumkara bhagavati*, *Manayil pothi* (pothi for bhagavati), *Palanthayi kannan*, *Pada veeran*, *Kadathanattu makkam*, *Ponnuan thondachan*, etc. many of these gods are believed to come after death to the injustice did to them. For each community there are particular ancestral god called *Thondachan* (*Puli maranja thondachan*, *Ponnuan thondachan*, *Perumbuzhayachan*, etc.). The warrior gods of Theyyam include *Angakkaran*, *Aadi mooliyadan*, *Oorppazhassi*, *Kundora chamundi*, *Kshetra palan*, *Padakkethi bhagavati*, *moovalam kuzhi chamundi*, *Vettakkarumakan*, *Vaira jathan*, etc. Village gods include *Chuzhali bhagavati*, *Aippalli Theyyam*, *Chanayum kothayum*, *Kavumbayi bhagavati*, etc. They are considered the protectors of the respective village and its people. The gods and goddesses closely related to earth and nature, and to the daily lives of the people are *Kalichon* (or *Kalichekavan*), *Kunjar kurathi*, *Aadi vedan*, *Onappottan*, *Karkkidothi*, etc., and these gods are related to various stages of agriculture. There are many male gods (*Aan kolangall*) also which are played as Theyyam, including *Kuruntini kaman*, *Kizhakken daivam*, *Vatta pootham*, *Undayan*, *Gulikan Theyyam*, *Pula pottan*, *Daivathar*, *Nedu paliyan* or *Bali Theyyam*, *Daivathar*, etc. People also believe that certain gods are capable of curing diseases such as *Maari Theyyam*, *Vasoori mala*, *Ucchara Theyyam*, etc., since people had no solution to certain pandemics, they approached gods to save them. There are some Muslim Theyyam also reflecting the religious coexistence, including *Bappiriyan Theyyam*, *Aali Theyyam*, *Kalanthu mukri*, etc.

Nature and its components are also worshipped as Theyyam, *oorvara devata* (earth gods), *vana devata* (forest and hill gods), *mriga devata* (animal gods), and *nayattu devata* (hunting gods). For a community living close to nature and its resources, believing these kinds of gods was necessary. Nature gods are explained in detail in the following sections of this paper. About the animal gods, like the many other indigenous societies of India (Warli tribe of Maharashtra worship Waghoba deity, Tiger is worshipped in the Sundarbans of West Bengal, Tigers are worshipped by

the Irula and Solega tribes of Karnataka a few to list), worshipping the majestic carnivores – tiger and leopard – is present in Theyyam as well. There is a group of Theyyam that are based on tigers and/or leopards, and are known as *Puli Theyyam/ Puli makkal/ Aivar puli daivangal*. *Puli Theyyam* is not a single Theyyam but a general term using to refer to eight Theyyam mainly – *Puli kandan, Pulli karinkali, Kandappuli, Marappuli, Puli maruthan, Kalappuli, Puliur kannan, and Puliur kali*, where *Puliur kannan* and *Puliur kali* are most popular Theyyam (Namboodiri, 1980).

Human-wildlife Coexistence

Human-wildlife coexistence is a way of understanding and conceptualising the human-wildlife relationship. Humans and wildlife are observed to have positive as well as negative relations. The constant conflict of interest between humans and wildlife on common natural sources, and other resources of humans are generally called human-wildlife conflict, and it often negatively impacts wildlife by affecting their existence, and humans by affecting their food security and economic well-being (through impacts such as crop loss, livestock depredation, etc.). The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) – the international body to manage the matters of conservation of nature, and wildlife - has recognised the increasing trend of Human-Wildlife Conflict (HWC) across the world, and constituted a specialist group on it. The Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence Specialist Group (HWCCSG) identifies multiple dimensions of HWC and provides solutions and policy interventions to the negative interaction between people and wildlife. The term ‘coexistence’ is to seek the positive relationships between humans and wildlife for attitudinal change on wildlife and to cultivate tolerance and acceptance towards wildlife, for the sustainable management of HWC. A better management of human-wildlife conflict is necessary for ensuring peace and for the conservation success of wildlife. The IUCN HWCCSG (Human-wildlife Conflict and Coexistence Specialist Group) defines human-wildlife coexistence as the choice made by humans to share land and natural resources with competent agents of wild-wildlife species – in sustainable ways at some time and continued through generations through cultural belief systems and traditional ecological knowledge.

This study explores the cultural belief systems on wildlife existing in the state of Kerala (India) associated with the ritualistic dance of Theyyam to find the preliminary elements of human-wildlife coexistence, through the analysis of legends of Theyyam and Theyyam’s origin stories from the literature and ballads of Puli Theyyam. (Namboodiri, 1980., Karippath, 1986., Kannan, 2013)

Human-wildlife Coexistence and Cultural Belief Systems

Culture can influence local wildlife management, and attitude towards wildlife and can influence sustainable management of natural resources and wildlife. Indigenous societies have been incorporating measures for wildlife conservation over the years through Cultural Belief Systems(CBS) based on fear, respect, gratitude, and kinship with tools such as totemism (a symbolic representation of living non-living things; associated with a group of people-clan, ethnic group, tribe- which use as a tool to symbolise ancestry, oneness, and unity of the particular group), animism, taboos (certain rules to restrict people from certain activities, restrict movements, etc. associated with particular places, by keeping sacred space for protection of and from wildlife. Entry to these spaces is restricted to people in particular periods by fear of ‘polluting’ the sacred space - an example of taboo. Violation of taboos is believed to bring negative consequences - wildlife attacks, natural calamities, diseases, loss of direction in the forest, etc.), rituals, festivals, ceremonies, and these are transferred through generations through oral history, folk songs and stories, folk art, ritualistic dances, etc. over centuries (Morris, 2000). Sacredness of particular species of trees, birds, and animals, and particular spaces are aiding the conservation and sustainable management of nature. CBS also manages Human -Wildlife Conflicts, by building tolerance and acceptance by associating wildlife with belief systems.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK): Co-living with wildlife for thousands of years makes people capable of formulating ways of coexistence through beliefs, knowledge, and practices that are passed through generations; it includes mitigation strategies, sustainable land use management, cultural linkage with various wildlife with a spectrum of fear and respect according to the threat they are posing, and positioning of them in the legends and stories. This relation with wildlife originating from culture is established and reiterated using cultural belief systems using tools such as taboos, totems, religious institutions, rituals, and ritualistic art forms (Morris, 2000).

Snippets of Human-wildlife Coexistence through Cultural Belief Systems

Indigenous groups have the tradition of coexistence with nature, and a wide spectrum of CBS associated with nature is identified around the world. The CBS of the indigenous societies of Africa, the Amazon, and Asia are mapped in literature. A brief review of it brings the following information.

Cultural belief systems and ritualistic dances

Ritualistic dances are preached and practised by indigenous communities, with multiple purposes – to ward off diseases, pay respect to wildlife, celebrate victories in wars, celebrate victories and memories of warriors and hunters, and share happiness and sorrow of various situations. Many indigenous societies have the traditions of enacting particular species of wildlife in their ritualistic dance forms to pay respect to those wildlife, which are associated with their life through stories of ancestry, kinship, permission for hunting, and display of penitence.

World

The Amazon has many indigenous groups who pay respect towards wildlife-from Jaguars to monkeys - through ritualistic dance forms. The puma dance (also known as *danca da onca*) of Bororo Indians of Brazil represents the spirit of the puma that got killed by a Bororo. The Jaguar dance of Coraro Indians is to pay respect to Jaguar gods, and many of the tribes from the early Mayans believe in the Jaguar gods. The *Akan tribe* of Ghana performs *adowa* dance, to pay respect to the spirit of the animal that they hunted and is a dance-mime to show other members of the tribe, how they did the particular hunt (Ampomah, 2014). Many of the tribes have this tradition of dance performances related to hunting (Gaspar, 2009).

In addition to the ritualistic dance forms, indigenous communities practise their CBS through totems, taboos, animism, and more. The *Nharira* community of Zimbabwe follows customary laws and regulations regarding wildlife (breaking customary rules believed to bring long dry spells and reduced crop yields for the whole community), rituals and ceremonies (conduct *mukwerera* and *matatenda* - rainmaking and thanksgiving ceremonies respectively- to please rain gods) totems, and taboos. *Tongo-Tengzuk* tribe of Ghana protects the West African crocodiles since they believe these crocodiles are their ancestral spirits, *Sankhana* tribe protects pythons and frogs which are believed to have helped their ancestors in crisis (Arhin,2008).

India

In India, many of the communities follow Cultural Belief Systems- totems, taboos, sacred groves, local-traditional-indigenous knowledge, religious beliefs, rituals, and ritualistic and folk art forms that aid biodiversity conservation (Bhagwat. et.al., 2011). Ritualistic dance forms are a popular medium of connecting the gods in tribal and non-tribal belief systems in India. The ritualistic dance forms include folk dances-which originated according to the local traditions and, other categories of dances which originate from the *Natyasastra* (a Sanskrit text that explains the rules

of dances). Bharatanatyam of Tamil Nadu, *Bhuta kola* of Karnataka, *Dalkhai* dance of Gond, Mirdha, *Kuda* tribes of central India, and Cham of Ladakh are some of the ritualistic dance forms to list. Many of the ritualistic dances are for worshipping wildlife by mimicking their movements and costumes resemble those species' appearance such as *huluk lam* of Naga tribe mimics monkeys, and *Senggeh Garcham* is a lion dance prominent in the *Tawang* of the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Hunting dances are also prominent in many tribes of the country, with a focus on many wildlife species. To list the cultural belief systems of indigenous groups of India, *Idu Mishmi* tribe of Northeast India take part in tiger conservation based on kinship-they consider tigers as their elder brother, since both are from the same womb as per Mishmi mythology and killing a tiger is equivalent to homicide (Aiyadurai, 2016). The Karbis of Assam believe every animate and inanimate object has *Karjong*(soul), which ensures respect towards everything around them. The Karbi have different clans, which revere different species; Therang clan – hornbill (believe hornbills saved their ancestors from a severe flood), Teron- Rui Teron snake, and Torbis – Eagle (Sarma & Barpujari, 2011).

Kerala

In the state of Kerala, a number of ritual dances are practised and performed by different communities, having a varied spectrum in the scale of popularity and heterogeneity of believers. There are a large number of ritualistic dance forms performed in Kerala. The theatrical dance forms of *Koodiyattam*, *Padayani*, *thira*, *vattakkali*, *Theyyam*, *sarppam thullal*, and *padakam* are a few to list. The traditional ritualistic dance forms possess central characteristics such as its links with mother goddess worship, and sacred groves. The ritualistic dance forms are performed with different aims – educating young about the legends, transmission of culture, celebrating memories of great warriors, supernatural acts of the ancestors, and more.

The innate connection of the indigenous societies with nature is inherited through generations, practices rituals, and ritualistic dance forms to remind them of their roots. Connectedness and fear towards nature and wildlife made them position nature above them and worshipped her blessings and support for their day-to-day life. The ritual dances of Scheduled Tribes are for pleasing gods to get solutions for problems of particular people. The rules of the dances are not as rigid as popular ritualistic dances, however, the people follow rigid rules of purity and sacredness associated with it. In Kerala STs from north to south have their own ritualistic dances and folk dances. *Ayyarukali* of malappanikkar tribe, *Putthariyattam* of Adiyar tribe, *Nayattu Theyyam* and *Malakkari Theyyam* of Kurichiar tribe, *Aivar*

kali of Malayar tribe, *Daivakkali* of karimbalar tribe, *Vilppattu* of ulladar tribe, *Attam* of irular tribe, *Vattakkali* of Kurumar are a few to list. The performers follow a strict *Vruta* (a set of rules to follow to ensure purity) for days before the performance. Some of the ritualistic dance forms are performed as a group, however, some others are performed by a single person. Theyyam of Mavilar, malavettuvar, Kurichiar, karimbalar tribes are performed by a single person who is believed to represent god. The dances mostly are associated with ballads – either elaborate expressions of legends and folk stories to educate people about the traditions, or oral commands and lines that in repetition unify the performance of the group. The movements of the performer often change with the nature of ballads, and at the end of the performance, the performance is observed to be in a fast rhythm. In addition to the ritualistic dance forms, the scheduled tribes have a vast base of dances that mimics wildlife such as *Narikkuth* (*Nari*- leopard/tiger) of Pathiyar, Kurumar, and Kadar tribes, *Puli nritham* (dance of tigers) of adiyar tribe, *Elelam karadi*(*karadi*-bear) of Irular tribe, *Pulikandi kurathi* of malavettuva tribe, *Kooman pattu* (*kooman*-owl) of Kurichia tribe, Muthala Theyyam (*muthala*-crocodile) of mavilar tribe are a few of such dances. The performers remind the particular species through their realistic mimicking of that wildlife. Continuous observation of the particular species in their lives enables them to do so. (Mathirappalli.M., 2013)

Ritualistic Dance of Theyyam: Nature as god

In earlier times people were living closer to nature and wildlife, and keeping their resources safe from the wildlife was necessary for them. The humongous power of nature made them believers in nature's power, which made them believe nature and wildlife as gods. In Theyyam also, there are certain gods which are *vana devata* (gods of the forest) and *mriga devata* (animal gods). People of traditional societies believed these gods saved them and their resources from the calamities. In addition, hunting was another important aspect of their life. Hunting was not for leisure but as a way of survival and food. These gods are still respected and celebrated as Theyyam in North Malabar. The hunting gods include *Muthappan*, *Vayanattu kulavan*, *Vishnu moorthi*, *Kallurootti*, etc. Some of the *vana devata* with Theyyam are *Kattu madanta*, *Thalachilon*, *Poothadi daivam*, *Malakkali*, *Kannikkoru makan*, etc.

In the *mriga devata* devotion serpent gods/*naga devata* have given very much respect. There are Theyyam of animals that people had to encounter frequently such as wild boar, snake, crocodile, leopard, and tiger. Animal gods are more frequent in the areas where forests are present. Serpent gods with Theyyam are *Naga rajavu*,

Naga kandan, Naga pothi, Naga kanni and Naga kaman. Other animal gods with Theyyam include *anna panchuruli*(pig), *Panchuruli* (pig), *Muthala Theyyam* (crocodile), *puli kandan, Pulli karinkali, Pulloor kali, Kandapuli, marapuli, Puli maruthan, kalapuli, Puliuru kannan* (tiger/leopard). The crop loss and livestock depredation of the wildlife may have made the people pay respect to the wildlife to hope that the animals might leave them if they give offerings to them. (Namboodiri, 1980., Karipath.R.C, 1986., Kannan. Y. V, 2013)

Puli Daivangal - Legends and Elements of Coexistence

The ballads of Theyyam are *thottam pattu*. Stories, legends, and histories associated with each Theyyam are described in the *thottam pattu*. *Puli Theyyam* is a popular Theyyam in which the leopards/tigers are represented. The *puli Theyyam* also known as *puli daivangal, Aivar devata, and aivar puli makkal*. Similar to many other Theyyam, the origin of *puli daivangal* has traces of the legends of lord Siva of the Hindu religion, it is identified that the *saiva* tradition might have influenced and incorporated into the regional legends through the years. From the records of several Theyyam scholars, the story of the *puli Theyyam* unfolds as the following.

Siva, together with his wife – *Parvati* - was watching over the earth to check well-being. A beautiful view of two leopards who are in love attracted their attention, and they watched the beauty of expression of love between them. Influenced by this, *Siva* and *Parvati* became leopards (*thottam pattu* describe them as *Puli*, which can be either leopard or tiger, as both locally use the word *Puli*) and came to the forest. *Siva* became *Puli kandan*, and *Parvati* became *Pullikarinkali* (black leopard). They both celebrated their time as *Puli* by enjoying love, and sex. They moved from one forest to another and reached *thathanar kaavu* to deliver their children. *Pullikarinkali* gave birth to five beautiful cubs who were called *Aivar pulimakkal/ aivar puli devata* and are *Kanda Puli, Mara Puli, Puli maruthan, Kala Puli, and Puliuru kannan* (also known as *Puliuru nayanar*). *Puliuru Kali* – came to help *Pulli karinkali* to deliver the babies and take care of them, and is believed to be sent by the god *vishnu*. *Pulli karinkali* was pleased to have her by her side and blessed her that she would be known as the youngest of their children. *Pulli karinkali* and *Puli kandan* left the *Aivar puli makkal* and *Puliuru kali* to fend for themselves and left for *Kailasa* (where *Siva* and *Parvati* reside). They travelled through many forests – *Manchattiyam kunn, Mayattiyam para, Idimuzhngan kunn, Nari mayangan chalu, and thollarveli*. One day, they felt too thirsty for blood, but could not find anything in the forest, and they saw that *Kurumbrathiri Vanor* (a local ruler) had a lot of cattle in his seven cattle houses. They waited till night to hunt them down, and all the *Puli makkal* ate all the cattle of *Kurumbrathiri vanor*, with the help of *Puli kandan* - their

father. The next morning, *Kurumbrathiri vanor* was devastated to see his cattle farms empty, so he asked *Karinthiri Nair* – a well-known hunter in that area - to teach the *Puli* a lesson. *Karinthiri Nair* waited with his arrows for the *Puli makkal* at night on the top branch of a mango tree. The *Puli makkal* came at night without knowing any of these. However, their father saw the hunter and came to help his children. The hunter pointed his tools, but before he could even move an inch *Puli kandan* attacked him from below, following their father's lead the children – *kanda puli*, *marapuli*, and *Kalapuli* attacked the hunter from all sides. The next morning, *Kurumbrathirir vanor* saw the dead body of the hunter hanging on the mango tree. The *puli makkal* continued livestock depredation and other disturbances, and no solutions were effective. In those days, when people were helpless, astrologers were the last hope. Similarly, *vanor* also asked astrologers to find solutions to the disturbances from the *Puli*. The astrologers found that these animals are not merely some normal carnivores, but children of *Siva* and *Parvati*, and the only solution is to give them proper position and offer prayers, and offerings and perform Theyyam in their names. The *Kurumbrathiri vanor* was hesitant to give a position in his country as they had no experience of having animal gods, therefore he prayed to his favorite deity - *Tulu bhagavati*-to help him to decide the proper place for *Puli daivam*. As a result, they were given *sthanam* (sacred space) at *Pulikkunn* of *Tulu nadu*, north of *Kurumbrathiri vanor's* place, as instructed by the *Tulu bhagavati*. (Namboodiri, 1980., Karipath, 1986., Kannan, 2013., Raghavan, 2017). The following lines of *thottam pattu* identify the godly spirit of these leopards and explain the transformation of leopards into gods

Vrighakriti poondavarum Puli
Roopathe vedinjudharaayaam
Sheekhratharam nalla puli
Daivangalumayan

There are some elements of cohabitation between humans and top predators like leopards and tigers in the above-said story. The presence of the leopard (and black panther, a type of leopard), and tiger near human inhabitation is evident as it is described in the story that *siva* and *parvati* were observing leopards playing, and also from the threads that *Pulli karinkali* wanted to eat the heart of *godavari* cow of *kurumbrathiri vanor* during her pregnancy. On analysing the particular Theyyam representing leopards/tigers a close relationship between humans and higher order carnivores can be seen. The movements and facial expressions of the performers of this Theyyam resemble the tigers and are pointing at the close observation derived from the cohabitation in closer spaces. The legends on the origin of this Theyyam display both attacks of wildlife on human inhabitation and human's reactive measures

– hunting – to the problem. Encounters with wildlife including large carnivores like leopards and tigers were common, and they were eating the cattle of the people. It is evident that there were expert hunters at those times, Theyyam of *karinthiri nair* – the hunter who was killed by the *puli makkal* in this story - is proof of that. However, Deification was the final solution when all of humanity's known solutions were in vain, and respect originated from respect towards powerful, fear, and helplessness. It was a popular way of coping and coexisting with the threats from nature where people were helpless. The tradition of annual repetition of the ritualistic dance of Theyyam to reiterate respect towards the wildlife - *Puli* in this case. The people believed the blessings of *Puli daivangal* along with other Theyyam related to the protection of livestock, like *Kalichan/kalichekon* are believed to keep their cattle safe from wildlife attack, and it might have helped to increase tolerance and acceptance towards the wildlife species. Similar to many other communities around the world these ritualistic elements contributed to sustainable interaction with the wildlife, and sustainable hunting.

Upon seeing the Theyyam of *Puli daivangal*, many of the people from different communities wished to have their presence in their native places. *Puli Theyyam* spread across the villages bordering forest in the North Malabar, people's fear and respect towards majestic carnivores might have been an agent for this geographic spread. As the legend says *puli daivangal* went to the places where the devotees wished for their presence, and the ballad (*thottam pattu*) sees this as the following:

Paarithilithamotthamavare varumoro dikkil
Paaraathe vasichathu paravaan paaramasadhyam

The ballad simply translates as they (*Puli daivam*) went to and lived in the areas where people wished for their presence, and it is impossible to explain the limits of *Puli daivam*'s presence. (Namboodiri, 1980., Karippath.R.C, 1986., Kannan. Y. V, 2013., Raghavan. K, 2017). The *puli Theyyam* is performed in *puli* temples, *puli kunn*(hills), and *puli sthanam* (sacred space). Keeping some spaces exclusively for the worship of animal and nature gods is a traditional way of coexisting with wildlife in many of the indigenous societies. Worship of *Puli daivam* in sacred sthana, *Kunn*, and temples can be seen in the light of this tradition. In addition, it is written in some regional historical documents that, people used to see leopards in these hills and they did not attack humans (Kannan. Y. V, 2013).

About the performance of these Theyyam, the following characteristics are seen, some of the *puli Theyyam* (*kanda puli* and *mara puli*, *Pulikandan* and *puliyur kannan*) are performed together, some other *puli Theyyam* performed alone (*Puliyur/pullur kali*, *Puli kandan*, *Puli maruthan*, *Puli chekon*) and some performed

along with other Theyyam (*Pullur kali Theyyam* is performed in *Muchilott bhagavati kaavu*, *Puliyur kannan* along with *wayanattu kulavan*, etc.).

Conclusion

The ritualistic dance forms act as a strong medium for the cultivation and propagation of cultural belief systems and to practise and display respect towards Other Than Human (OTH) animals in folk cultures. Theyyam representing *puli makkal/puli Theyyam/ aivar puli devata* originated to show respect towards higher order carnivores – leopard, tiger – whom they had to have constant encounters with. Even if the scenario was like this, the cultural belief system iterated through the annual ritualistic dance performance of Theyyam, might have been a tool to cultivate tolerance towards those species, and which might have acted as the tool for sustainable hunting and sustainable management of wildlife, thus aiding wildlife conservation in the regions of North Malabar. It might have acted as a medium to propagate the culture of tolerance through the generations.

However, the heterogeneity of the present society makes it relevant to enquire about the importance of popular ritualistic dance forms such as Theyyam in popular culture for the same purpose of conservation and human-wildlife coexistence. Much of the Cultural Belief Systems(CBS) and Indigenous Knowledge(IK) have been washed away due to the influx of socioeconomic and political changes for years, however, recognition and respect of the existing IK and belief systems might be able to revive Human-Wildlife coexistence practises. This study demands further inquiry in the field about the elements of coexistence through the cultivation of tolerance and acceptance, as studies focusing on wildlife conservation are rare in the Theyyam studies.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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