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The Liminal Space of Theyyam: Intersections and Interruptions

Occupying the liminal space between dance, theatre, and ritual, the Theyyam of Kerala is a unique blend of the ritualistic and the 'aesthetic'. My paper attempts to study this performance tradition as a ritual practice that goes beyond binaric paradigms such 'sacred' and 'profane'. As Farley Richmond puts it, rituals serve to "punctuate, set off, and frame performances". Ritual performances are engendered and embedded in the cultural fabric of the society and cannot be abstracted out of these social processes. Thus, when one observes a Theyyam performance, one encounters the history and cultural life of Northern Malabar. The literary texts (*thottams*) of the performance narrativise the legends, often of figures who have suffered social injustice or trauma in their livestake on the forms of Theyyams. They also enumerate the diverse customs and practices of the community. In Theyyam, one observes that the efficacy of the performance not only depends upon the proper recitation of the texts (thottams), but also on the "mode of life of the medium and how well the deity comes onto the body. (Bruckner and Schombucher 607). Hence, ritual efficacy becomes the organisational center of this performing tradition. Similarly, unlike other theatrical performances, Theyyam cannot be staged at all times of the year and involves strict adherence to ritual considerations of time. The deity thus possesses the performers only during these specific times and is contingent on the vrutanastanas that accompany the performance. Here, the 'aesthetic' cannot be separated from its culture – specific context and the distinctions between ritual and theatre, and essentialised notions of 'sacred' and 'profane' are constantly blurred.

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