

Cultural Identity and Aesthetics in Indian Folk Dance *Thidambu Nritham*: A Performance Outlook

Puthumana Govindan Namboothiri^{1*}, *Govindan Puthumana*²

¹ *Thidambu Nritham Practitioner and Researcher, India*

² *Marie curie Research fellow, Technical University of Denmark, Kgs. Lyngby, Denmark*

Abstract. *Thidambu Nritham* is an ancient Indian folk dance performed in villages of North Malabar in Kerala state. The performance follows several rules of Natya shastra, and at the same time, has influenced the cultural and social life of Malabar due to the ritualistic nature. According to the background and history, Kolathiri dynasty has introduced *Thidambu Nritham* as a part of temple rituals, the art form being seven-century old. *Thidambu Nritham* is deep-rooted in the civilization of north Kerala, as it has close links with agrarian culture and harvests in the region. The elements used for rituals and ceremonies in *Thidambu Nritham* connect with soil fertility and prayers for an enhanced crop yield. The aesthetics of *Thidambu Nritham* is related to the colourful decorations of *thidambu* using flowers and drumming in four rhythms. The culture of temple procession and worshippers joining the celebration could be traced from the prehistoric Indian tradition and heritage.

Keywords: *Thidambu Nritham, North Malabar, folk dance, temple ritual*

Received 10 September 2020 | Revised 07 April 2021 | Accepted 27 April 2021

1 Introduction

Art forms and art performances are an important part of social life. The identity and the way of life of cultural society are significantly influenced by the aesthetic perception of each of the individuals [1]. Folk dance forms are largely formed and developed on the foundation of these individualistic and societal insights, and in some way or the other, linked with different phases of life. The folk dance representing a society integrates the predecessors' customs, heritage symbols, aesthetics, and pains. According to the background of the society, the folk dance form display emotions through colours, genre, fantasies, and mannerisms, frequently comprehending divinity [2]. The myths established over centuries become the basis for folk dance performances and, as a result, help strengthen the bonding between all the sections of the society. *Thidambu Nritham* is an important ritual among the folk dances, a cultural tradition in the Northern part of Kerala in south India [3].

The roots of folk dance *Thidambu Nritham* are deep into the ancient culture of Malabar, including temple rituals, rhythm, dress, costumes, and communication language. *Thidambu Nritham* is a

*Corresponding author at: Puthumana Illam, Nellikkat, P. O. Balla, Kanhangad, Kasaragod, Kerala, India – 671531.

E-mail address: puthumanagovindannamboothiri@gmail.com

case in point regarding how the rich and diverse cultural heritage of North Kerala is preserved over centuries and applied in ritualistic form. The scientific basis for the *Thidambu Nritham* folk dance had been carefully incorporated for discussions. The *Natya Shastra* by Bharata Muni evolved during 4 BC is the basis for *Thidambu Nritham* [2-3]. The text assimilates aesthetics of dance, legends about gods and goddesses and art descriptions. The creative thoughts of Bharata included dance, Melos, and recitals. Dance was considered comparatively imperative for achieving cosmic connections with God. *Natyashastra* gives a structure for carrying out folk dance *Thidambu Nritham*. Though an important element of the temple worships as a part of the annual festivals, villagers' customs and beliefs, and on the contrary, the artistic values are evident in *Thidambu Nritham*. *Thidambu Nritham* stands out from the rest of the temple rituals due to the cultural identity representing the surrounding society and uniqueness in the characteristic features.

Concerning *Thidambu Nritham*, the emergence of temples in North Kerala, ritualistic manifestations, Vedic chants, rituals, Vaastu system of temple architecture, scheme of worship, and prayers have paved the way for the development of a local culture of Malabar. The temple construction had followed the Kerala model, and the architecture and standards were connected with the temple rituals [4-5]. However, the artistic values of *Thidambu Nritham* could not be measured using limited standards. Thus, the method chosen in this research was through experience and observations of *Thidambu Nritham* in the temple courtyard, discussions with well-known scholars of folk arts, collection of relevant materials, and note preparation. This paper is divided into three sections. In section 2, the background and history of *Thidambu Nritham*, the evolution of *Thidambu Nritham*, and patrons of the folk dance are discussed briefly. The aesthetic part of *Thidambu Nritham*, including decorations, drumming, colours, forms, and rituals, are elaborated in section 3. In section 4, *Thidambu Nritham* on society and its impact on generating a cultural identity is presented. The paper ends with findings derived from this analysis, conclusive remarks, and recommendations for future work in section 5.

2 Background and history

The approach used is to understand the background and historical evidence which support the evolution of the rituals which govern *Thidambu Nritham* performance in temples. *Thidambu Nritham* draws up Kannur, Kasaragod, and Kozhikode districts' boundaries, showing enormous geological and cultural variations of seashores, mountains, valleys, and rivers (see Fig. 1. The legend of saint Parashurama's division of Kerala into different villages and handing over the rule of the Kolathunadu to Kshatriya kings led to several conflicts in the region. It is believed that Kolathiri king Udayavarma of Perinchellur has invited 237 Brahmin families belonging to three *agharas* from Gokarna state in south Karnataka in the 13th century CE, and few of the rituals observed in Gokarna were included as a part of temple festivals in Kerala. Another argument is that the temple procession and carrying of decorated deity over the head as a part of the worship

in Tamil Nadu, as mentioned in the Sangam literature (between 400 BCE and 300 CE) and Bhakthi movement was introduced in Malabar region [4]. Yet another argument is about *Pooram* festival in Thrissur districts in central Kerala. Kolathiri King had attended the elaborate festival of *Arattupuzha pooram* (3000 years old ritual), and thought of introducing an equivalent ritualistic celebration in North Malabar and entrusted temple priests to introduce *Thidambu Nritham* [5].



Figure 1. North Malabar in Kerala state, the region in which *Thidambu Nritham* is a popular temple ritual

The Mooshika dynasty of Ezhimala in Kannur district later became the Kolathiri kings. Kolathiri kings were the patrons of *Thidambu Nritham*. The history indicates that Ramaghata Mooshika, who established the empire, was the son of a pregnant queen who migrated from Ganga terrain to Ramanthali. *Ramaghata* built the kingdom. Because the prince was born in the woods of *nenmeni vaaka* trees, known as Mooshaka in Sanskrit, the dynasty was named the Mooshika dynasty. The official symbol of the dynasty included a bunch of *Mooshaka* flowers. The goddess of *Madayikavu* temple became the supreme deity of the royal palace, and *naandakam* sword was worshipped [4]. The history of the Mooshika dynasty is elaborated in Historian Atula's *Mooshikavamshakruti*. The Velan community living in huts to the eastern part of Mangalore in Karnataka state had migrated to Malabar to be involved in the celebrations.

3 Aesthetics in *Thidambu Nritham* folk dance

'Thidambu' is the image of the deity worshipped at temples. Thidambu is kept near the idol of the main deity in the temple's sanctum sanctorum inside the temple's main boundary wall. Thidambu is used for the *seeveli* rituals above the elephants in Kerala state's central and southern

regions. The Seeveli is a daily ritual procession of caparisoned elephants. The small image of the deity in the Thidambu should be cast using gold, silver or alloys of other metals.



a.



b.



c.



d.

Figure 2 a-d. Aesthetics in *Thidambu Nritham* concerning the decorated image of the temple deity, a. decorated *Thidambu* in the southern region of North Malabar (front side), b. decorated *Thidambu* in the southern region of North Malabar (backside), c. decorated *Thidambu* used for

ritual procession in central and south Kerala, d. decorated *Thidambu* in the northern region of North Malabar

During the decoration process, the image of the deity known as *balibimbam* is linked to a frame known as *chattam*. In north Malabar, *chattam* is of two kinds – *kudachattam* and *marachattam*. The *kudachattam* is prepared using a frame made of bamboo in a circular shape, see Figure 2 a-b. The *marachattam* is prepared in a semicircular shape; see Figure 2 d. According to the ritual rites at the temple, the *Thidambu* is decorated using gold ornaments, silver ornaments, and flowers. The flowers typically used for decoration are holy basil, jungle geranium, chrysanthemum, and jasmine. The ornaments used for the decoration of *Thidambu* are of standard shapes and sizes, and the numbers may vary according to the nature of the presiding deity. The *Thidambu* weighs approximately 30 kg.

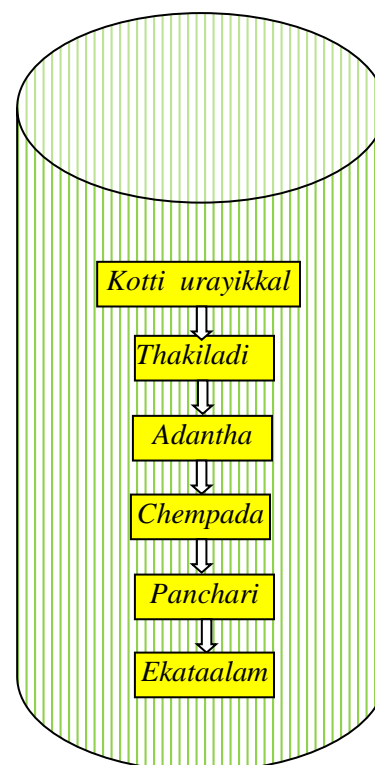


Figure 3. *Thidambu Nritham* dance at the temple and accompanying drumming patterns

The decorated *Thidambu* is taken out with the religious rituals and placed above the dancer's head over a turban known as *ushnipeedam*. The dancer wears a white-coloured loincloth with coloured borders and a red-coloured cloth piece across the body's chest and upper part. Further, the dancer marks the body using sandal paste and red turmeric paste; see Figure 3 for a pictorial representation of the *Thidambu Nritham* dance. The drumming sequence begins with *kotti urayikkal* followed by *thakilati*, *atantha*, *chempata*, *panchari* and *ekataalam* (see Fig. 3). *Thidambu Nritham* is conducted annually as a part of special days in which a special procession is also held. During the *kotti urayikkal* ceremony, the dancer is transformed from a devotee to an

oracle or the mediator between God and devotees at the temple. When the pace of the drumming increases, the dance exponent and the God become one at the same.

4 The cultural identity of Malabar in *Thidambu Nritham*

According to the temple ceremony and rituals, the dancer experiences a spark of the divine in his heart. God's spirit is equated in the *Thidambu* carried by the dancer. The dancer's footstep is by the rhythm throws an impulse of enthusiasm in the audience, and the moments of excitement begin. The wishes of devotees to pray God close to them becomes fruitful once a year. The dancer uses steps using both legs and continues for about 150 minutes.

In the olden days, the prayers and rituals were associated with hills, trees, and rivers. It was believed that the people, cattle, and agricultural land would be protected from flood and other natural calamities by God. Because agriculture was the main income source, agricultural resources such as crops, fruits, and vegetables were offered to God during the annual festival. *Thidambu Nritham* is related to harvest festivals and indirectly promotes agricultural activities and eco-friendly living practices. The ingredients for reverence, honour, and worship ceremonies are typically oil, cotton wick, flowers, coconut, camphor, traditional oil lamps, betel leaves, and paddy grains. All these elements are directly linked with the fertility of the soil. *Thidambu Nritham* is believed to have performed to enrich the crop harvest and bring prosperity and harmony in the village.

5 Conclusion

The aspects of aesthetics in *Thidambu Nritham*, a temple folk dance in the Malabar region of Kerala state, are presented in this paper, followed by the influence of the dance on society to develop a cultural identity in the region. The dance form demonstrates an emotion of societal togetherness among the devotees. It is interesting to observe that two types of geometries of frames of *Thidambu* are used for decoration – completely circular and semicircular. It is evident that the seven-century-old dance form originated as a part of early village life wherein trees, rivers, and mountains were worshipped. In the present day scenario, *Thidambu Nritham* is significant since it provides a message of a healthy agrarian society, eco-friendly living, and social equality. The relationship between ancient Asian dance forms and *Thidambu Nritham* is yet to be explored.

REFERENCES

- [1] C. Sachs, “World history of the dance” . The Norton Library, U. S. A, 1963, p. 15.
- [2] S. K. R. Rao, “The folk origins of folk temples”. IBH Prakashana, Bangalore, p.65.
- [3] P. G. Namboothiri, and P. Govindan, “Thidambu Nritham: a practitioner’s perspective”, in *Scripting dance in contemporary India*, M. Anoop, V. Gulati. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington books, 2016, pp. 85-92. [online] Available: NetLibrary e-book.
- [4] A. Azeez, “Studies in Islamic culture in the Indian environment”. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969. [online]. Available: Oxford reference Online.
- [5] K. Vatsyayana, “Traditions of Indian folk dance”. India Book Company, 1976. [online] Available: India books online.