



## **Why Not Women: A Selective study about representation and role of Goddess (Female Deities) in Theyyam**

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### **Abstract:**

*Theyyam, a traditional ritual art form originating in the southern Indian state of Kerala, is a living tapestry of mythology, spirituality and culture. Although it features predominantly male performers, this selection study explores the understudied area of performance and role of women in Theyyam performance. This study aims to illuminate the complex dynamics of gender and divinity in this unique cultural phenomenon. This study explores the fascinating paradox of Kerala's Theyyam tradition: despite a pantheon of many female deities, girls are conspicuously absent from Theyyam rituals. This report examines the various socio-cultural and historical factors that contribute to this gender inequality and illuminates the complex interplay of traditions, gender roles and social expectations.*

**Keywords:** *Teyyam, Male Domination, Theyyam Stories, New Generation, Traditional values, Kerala Folklore Arts*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

In Kerala and Karnataka, India, Theyyam (Teyyam, Theyyam, Theyyattam) is a widely practiced form of ritual devotion. Theyyam consisted of conventions, ceremonies and traditions dating back several millennia. Theyyam artists occupy a prominent position in the traditional caste system created by Namboothiri Brahmins in Kerala, where they belong to a lower caste. Residents of these areas pray to Theyyam for good things because they see it as a channel to God. Except for Devakoothu Theyyam, most of the performers are men. The only Theyyam ceremony performed by women is the Devakoothu, which takes place only in the Thekumbad Kulom Temple. In the Kolathunadu region of Kerala, which includes the present districts of Kasargod and Kannur, Wayanad and Vada-kara Mananthavady Taluk, Theyyam is mostly performed.



## **OBJECTIVES:**

The very objectives of this essay are-

As the title of the project indicates it discuss the female representation in Theyyam both in myths and in performance. In Kerala most of the Theyyam were formed from the suppressed feelings of a woman, hence here I would like to search why female performers are not coming forward for performing a Theyyam folk arts.

1. To study important performing Theyyam of Kerala which Goddesses (Female Deities)
2. To analyze the formation of Theyyam from the suppressed feelings of a woman as per myths and history
3. To examine the main domination of male in Theyyam and why women are not performing Theyyam

## **HISTORY**

“Without a doubt,” argue Bridget and Raymond Alchin, who studied Theyyam, and that a significant part of the modern folk religion is incredibly old and contains elements from earlier periods of Neolithic, Chalcolithic, settlement, and expression. This statement is mainly made about Fremin. Kaliyattam is the birthplace of Theyyam. The performance of Theyyam is reserved for indigenous tribal communities. These tribes included Malays, Panas, Velans, and Vannans. Sangam literature mentions Velani, one of the Theyyam dancers. These tribes and; dances are dedicated to well-known deities like Vishnu and Bhagavathi. The great classical Indian heritage brought new ideas and stories to the original Theyyam religion. However, its structure and content remained largely unchanged. According to Kerala tradition, Parasu Rama permitted the people of Kerala to celebrate festivals like Kaliyattam. Kaliyattam, also called Theyyattam or Daivattam, is an event lasting from three to eleven days. In Malayalam Theyyam etymologically means "God." Theyyam is practiced Sthanas (Kavu, Kottam) and Tharavadu, although it does not focus on temples. The divine places where Theyyams are present are Kavu, Thanam (Sthanam), Mundy, Ara, Palliyara and Kottam. Moreover, it is usually performed in sacred forests, Tharavadu courtyards, and open rice fields. Every year, during the harvest months from October to June, they are carried out. Compared to other Hindu temples in India, the wooden carvings that decorate the "Kavus engagement styles are very different. A sword, carved stones, a stool, a piece of wood, or a mask is often used to symbolize God.



## **CLASSIFICATION OF SUB-CULTS**

It can be assumed from the studies that most of the visible features of primitive, tribal, and religious worship of mankind had extended the popularity of Theyyam. Even the followers of Islam also join the sect in its functional aspects. It is made the deep-rooted folk religion of millions. For example, Bhagawathy known as the Mother Goddess, was and still has an important place in the area of Theyyam. In addition to practices like spirit worship, ancestor worship, hero worship, masathi worship, tree worship, animal worship, snake worship, disease goddess worship, and Gramadevata (village deity) worship, belong to the mainstream of Theyyam. Alongside these gods and goddesses are countless folk gods and goddesses. Most of these goddesses are known as Bhagavathy (Mother Goddess who is the divine and united form of the three main goddesses namely Brahman (Sarasvati), Vaishnavi (Lakshmi), and Shiva (Parvati).

Now, Theyyam is dominated by various branches of mainstream Hinduism such as Shaktism, Vaishnavism, and Shaivism. However, forms of atonement and other rituals are a continuation of a very old tradition. Blood sacrifice is seen in many religious centers, although it is forbidden in satist Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. In such centers, separate places are selected outside the shrine precincts for blood sacrifice and for making the traditional Kalam (a square created for this sacrificial event) known as Vadakkan Vathili. Their deities appeased by the sacrifice of roosters cannot enter such sanctuaries. This religious cockfight for a blood sacrifice, which also includes a cockbattle as a blood sacrifice, is an excellent example of a "cultural synthesis of both small and large cultures". Due to the alleged late revival of the Vaishnavism movement in Kerala, it did not have a profound impact on Theyyam. Only a few deities are available in this category. The two main Theyyam deities of Vaishnavism are Vishnumoorthi and Daivathar. Under the rule of Vishnuvardhana of the Hoysala dynasty, Vaishnavism was very popular in the Tuluva region in the 13th century. He was a great master of Vaishnavism. He was probably originally deified as Vishnumoorthi and associated with the Bhoota sect of the Tuluvates and was later also associated with Theyyam as a prominent folk deity. For some, the Vishnumoorthi legend symbolizes the migration of a god from Mangalore to Kolathunadu. Most of the other categories of Theyyam deities may be classified under Shaivism or Shaktism. Even spirits, ancestors, heroes, and animals are divine and belong to these categories. In short, Theyyam is a good example of the religious development of modern Hinduism and the various stages that followed, when it is generally understood that Hindu syncretism involves the reconciliation of ancient practices and rituals of ancient worship to obtain supernatural blessings. In the Indus Valley and other ancient civilizations, the mother goddess was invoked for fertility and prosperity.

## **GODDESS (FEMALE DEITIES) IN THEYYAM**

Built on Kavus and Tharavadus, Theyams have a faith-affirming concept and origin story.



Most of the Theyyams came to earth in the form of Goddess Kali, Shiva, Vaishnavism, and Yakshagandharis. There are many different people in the universe of Theyya, such as people who are born as people and achieve divine status after death, ghosts, ancestors, heroes, warriors, fertility goddesses, disease goddesses, animals, and Aishwarya and the mothers who came by boat but they can be divided into male and female. Both types of Theyyam Kolam are performed by the men of the Theyyatta community. The Malayalam woman KulothValliamma performs only one Theyya Kolam in the South Mattool area of Kannur district. It is also known as Devakoothu. In the old days, the Malayas (inferior caste religion) sang Pottan after Theyyam, Kanner, and Kothamur, being assistants to the men who were Theyyattakars (performers). Today, even that aspect is gone. There are 398 females Theyyami (goddesses) in my search that are not complete.

### **THEYYAM FROM THE SUPPRESSED FEELINGS OF A WOMAN**

In the study of Goddess Theyyam (female), an interesting factor was found that the rare Goddess Theyyam arises as a result of the murder of a superior group or develops from the repressed emotions of women. This research reveals shocking stories of abuse of power by upper Brahmin men against women. They used inferior people to satisfy all their needs. In old Kerala, pain system was greatly abused due to untouchability. Some Theyyam were formed as a result of the murder of women in protest against the sexual needs of the upper classes. I found 7 theyyams that occur after killing a woman for various reasons. But as a common denominator, they all point to the abuse of primary authority by a superior actor.

The discussed theyyams are namely:

- 1 . MakkavumMakkalum
- 2 . ManayilPothi
- 3 . MuchilottuBhagavathy
- 4 . ThottumkaraBhagavathy
- 5 . UmmachiTheyyam
- 6 . NeeliyarBhagavathy
- 7 . Kappalapothy

### **MYTHS AND HISTORY**

All Theyyams have strange origin stories. The myths and legends of Theyyam deities are often associated with local heroes and heroines. Here we explore the story/myth of Theyyam



mentioned above.

### **MAKKAVUM MAKKALUM**

Kunjimangalam Kunjimakkam, is the daughter of Unicheriya of Kadankot Nair clan. She was the only girl among the 12 brothers of King Kolathiri. After 12 sons, Makkam is a daughter born with many ritual prayers and sacrifices. She grew up before 12 brothers. Makkam married with her cousin and have two children Chathu and Cheeru. According to the dowry system, they decide to keep Makkam at home. But that is not the case. The wives of her brothers often blamed Makkam in various ways, but the brothers did not listen. Due to the love of their husbands towards Makkam, the jealous nieces decide to betray Makkam. Therefore, once the brothers had to go to war on the orders of Kolathiri. Seeing this, the angels removed the calves. They invented extraordinary stories about Vaniyan and Makkam returning home with oil every day. This was the time when the Makkam's brothers returned after the war and brought commercial oil. They looked away. When no one came to buy oil, Makam, who was sitting in the season room (menstrual time), told the merchant to put the oil to the west. When Vaniyan came out with the oil, the nuns with their husband Kanma arrived there. Narcissists blame spouses who have served and returned to the military for bad behavior. Their slurred laughter kindled anger against the brothers. Having forgotten her word, they decide to kill Makkam. But the younger brother and wife leave the house without ceasing to support it. The 11 brothers leave with Makkam and her children, saying they want to see the Kottayam lamp. Realizing their evil intentions, Makkam bathed, entered the hut of his family goddess Veera Chamundi, lit a lamp and prayed that she would show the people her innocence. During the journey, the thirsty Makkam took her children and moved to her new house in Chala. Makkam leaves after buying milk from his mother in that house. His mother saw the shining Makkam and her children and gave them a jar of milk to quench their thirst. To thank her, Makkam removed the ornaments from his neck and ears and placed them in a jar. Then they walked and crossed the Mambaram pass. When he crossed Mambaram and reached the well of Achankarappally, Bother said, do you see the star rising at noon? After hearing the brothers' question Makkam look into the well. At that time Brothers assassinated Makkam & her children and threw them into that well. Mavila, a witness to the event, also died. Kuttiraman, the youngest brother, was not the only one who stood against his brothers and; cruelty. The latter is the revenge of the destructive Makkam. Kunjimangalaman's house was burnt to ashes. Only Kottilakam with



Veera Chamund remained unburnt. Besides Kuttiraman and his wife, the brothers and their wives died. (The brothers soon quarreled and forgot about each other and stabbed each other to death with their swords). The world was convinced of the innocence of Makkam. Legend has it that after the massacre, Makkam and his children went west from their new home to Chala. Soon the people decided to worship Kolama, who became a child of God and proved his historical purity and died with the children. Thus Katangot Makkam, showing his historical purity, became one of the most revered deities of the Maloks. (The Achankarappally well which is believed to have killed Makkam and her child was closed recently. Achankarappally is located near a lake near Koothuparamba).

### **MANAYILPOTHI**

The story/myth of Manayilpoth is a crystal-clear testimony of communal supremacy. A woman of a lower family from the village of Vannan learned that she had plucked curry gum from a plough. In those old days, community supremacy was very strong. People of lower rank should not walk on public roads and should never come before Brahmins. Therefore, to pluck curry-gum from the plow is a very great mistake, and the householders became angry and murdered the woman, although she plucked the children because they were very hungry. An innocent woman was murdered for no reason and from her repressed emotions she came alive as a gift from God and later became known as Manayilpothi Theyyam. This one is built by Vannan community.

### **MUCHILOTTU BHAGAVATHY**

Vaniya Nair/Vaniyan community of North Malabar have a patron deity namely Muchilot Bhagavathy. Most scholars in folklore agree that she was a Brahmin virgin born in Rayaramangalath Mana; at Peringellur village near Taliparamba. She was well known for her immeasurable knowledge of the Vedas. It causes jealous to Peringellur Mootha Gurukkal (Brahman) and to his disciples. Naduvazhi called the Gurukkal and the young girl for an open defeat. Against the Virgo Spell Arguments and Counter replies Mootha Gurukal and his disciples were amazed, and they were afraid of failure. Being very clever and deceitful, they meditated to catch her somehow. They were asked her two questions: What is the most bearable pain? What is the most ecstatic pleasure? To which she innocently replied that mother's pain during childbirth is the most excruciating pain; and the joy of making love is the most ecstatic



pleasure. They twisted her answers, claiming that a woman without such literally experiences could never answer these questions, so she was not a virgin. The problem ended with him being fired. An innocent and delicate virgin girl was hit by the arrows of Brahmin treachery. She worshiped them and offered all her despair and anxiety of her heart before their divine presence and decided to burn herself. When she prepared his crumbs, Muchilot Padanayan accidentally came there. At her request, he very reluctantly poured oil from the cauldron into the fire. Thus, she killed herself and her soul went to Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva sent her back to earth with brotherly love along with boons, gold, jewels and various weapons to redeem the world. Padanayar was full of sorrow after seeing the burning of the virgin girl and was left with "Thuthika"(empty pot) and returned to his home. According to astrological speculation, Karnavar had a dream that Lord Shiva sent a virgin girl back to live in him. The goddess that Padanayar made to worship in the silver tabernacle and Padinjattakam, was known as Sree Muchilot Bhagavathy. Some of her devotees believe that the goddess blossomed from the sweat shed by Lord Shiva during his mighty dance on Mount Kailasa. Still others believe that he is a deity incarnated on earth prasadaman to cleanse the world of all incurable diseases or a goddess who was sent to earth in the form of a flame to destroy all the evils of the earth.

### **THOTTUMKARA BHAGAVATHY**

She is a poor woman who fell victim to the brutality of colonialism. While he was reading the Ramayana to ease his grief, Chirakkal's caretaker Thampuram found it. The news reached Mr. The gentleman invited the woman to the palace and asked her. The crime is that a mother who should have mourned the death of all her children read the book / Ramayana. The lady ran away from the palace and reached Kakkathode. He went down into the abyss and put out the fire. He was already naked. He walked towards the light that saw the streams. It was the floor. The mother-in-law gave them clothes to wear and water to drink. The woman died after getting dressed and drinking water on the porch of the house. They also cremated the body of a woman who did not know who she was. Later, luck began to appear in the house, but also bad omens in the palace. A woman who tried to get relief from a stream became a goddess and started worshipping a iliman named Thottinkara Bhagwati. When the goddess became a goddess, she gave the Lord a basket and a basket. The woman who tried to cure herself from the current became a goddess and began to worship a iliman named Thottinkara Bhagavathy. When the goddess became a goddess, she gave the Lord a basket and a basket. A woman who tried to get



relief from a stream became a goddess and started worshipping a iliman named Thottinkara Bhagavathy.

### **UMMACHITHEYYAM**

Ummachi Theyyam is held in Kasaragod district at Madikai Kakkat Kuloth Medam 9. This theyyam is structured as one kolam after another. Yogyar Nambadi Theyyam, a war hero associated with the origins of the Neeleswaram dynasty, transforms into Ummachchi Theyyam at the end of the play. Yogyar Nambadi Theyyam, who wears flowery hair and rice on his body, wears a veil at the end of the theyyam and becomes an Ummachchi Theyyam. That covered face Theyyam is known for his rice actors and Mappila speeches. Neeleswaram Kovil manager Yogyar Nambad was beaten to death by a Muslim woman working in the Kovil. But there is another interpretation. It is said that the cousin next door (a Muslim woman) who prepared dried curry for Kavil took rice from the Urals, blew it into the air and put it in her mouth. Seeing this, the overseer Yogyar became angry and struck him with a spear in his hand. My cousin was beaten to death and died. andquot; According to legend, this Muslim woman was later reborn as Ummachchi Theyyam and Karyasthan Yogyar Nambad as Theyyam. Ummachchi Theyyam is an iliam that can be considered a symbol of religious harmony and brotherhood. Ummachchi Theyyam is a testament to the fact that in the past, when Brahmin culture had less influence in society, people lived and worked in brotherhood without caste or religious boundaries.

### **NEELIYAR BHAGAVATHY**

Neeliyar Bhagavathi is a Theyyam ritual conducted in the northern part of Kerala. Neeliyar Bhagavathi is the goddess of the Mangattuparamba Neeliyar temple situated in Kerala. The story of Neeliyar Bhagavathy is, there was a low caste woman named Neeli who was very beautiful and intelligent in Kottiyoor, Kannur. Neeli was murdered by her father on the pretext of adultery with a local ruler and Neeli became Neeliyar Bhagwati after her death. When Neeli was alive, she lived near the sand bank. After his death, Neeliyar Bhagavathi when travelers came near the river adjacent to the site asked them before bathing if they needed oil and betel leaf (used instead of soap in ancient times). Whoever said yes and approached her, Neeliyar Bhagavathi caught them and drank their blood. Once a person named Kalakkad Namboothiri went there to take bath. There he saw Neeliyar Bhagavathi and she asked him his name. He answered that he was Kalakkad; and the goddess told him that she was Kali. Then she gave him oil and a taal leaf.





Kalakkad had drunk oil and taal juice by saying that it was Amruthu (nectar) given to him by his mother. The goddess was very happy as he called her mother. Thus spared his life and accompanied him on his journey to the west. Neeliyar then revealed to him that she was a goddess and said that she would like to live in a temple where a tiger and a cow coexist peacefully. On the way, Kalakkad saw a cow and a tiger side by side at Mangattuparambu of a Nambhoothiri, so he put down his umbrella (made of palm leaves) and rested there. The goddess decided to stay there with him on the umbrella. Kalakkad Nambhoothiri later built a temple over the goddess.

### **KAPPOLAPOTHI**

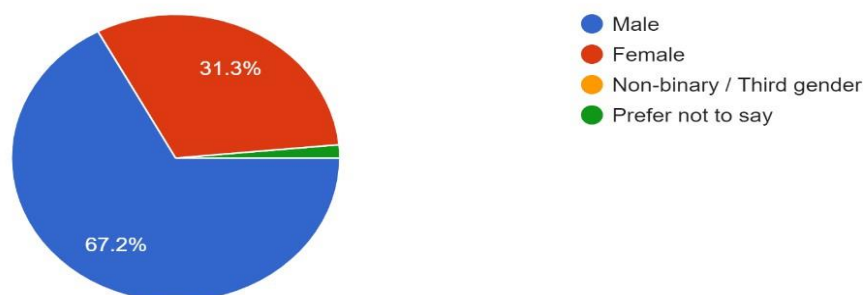
Kumbakapalathi (Kumba) had seven brothers in Arangath-padi. When the brothers went out to see the work of the Cauvery lamp, Kumba also went out. He didn't listen, even though he banned nerds. Kumba went the same way as the brothers. But crossing from Manmala, he got lost. Mavi Lanor gave fresh water to the thirsty Kumbakapalathi (Kumba). He went with her. The brothers looking for a sister found a pregnant sister (another actor) in Mavilakud. The brothers of Kubarota who destroyed the box and murdered him. After her death, Kumba became a goddess, namely Kappolapothi, due to her repressed feelings against communal murder. Looking at the above myths/stories about Theyyam (born after the death of a woman), most of them stem from a woman's repressed feelings of communal superiority. In ancient Kerala, such ilimas are the voice of the lower caste against communal supremacy.

### **DIGITAL SURVEY AND ANALYSIS**

Included gender a compulsory for finding the response male and female (% of gender). Included District as a compulsory as Theyyam is originated, performing familiar and generous at Kannur & Kasaragod districts of Kerala. Responses from these districts have much authenticity in the answers. Diagrammatic survey result is furnished below: -

Gender?

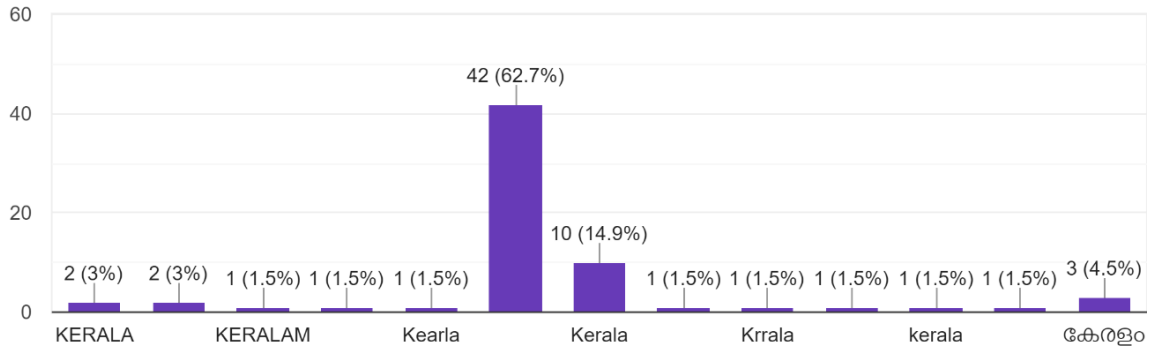
67 responses





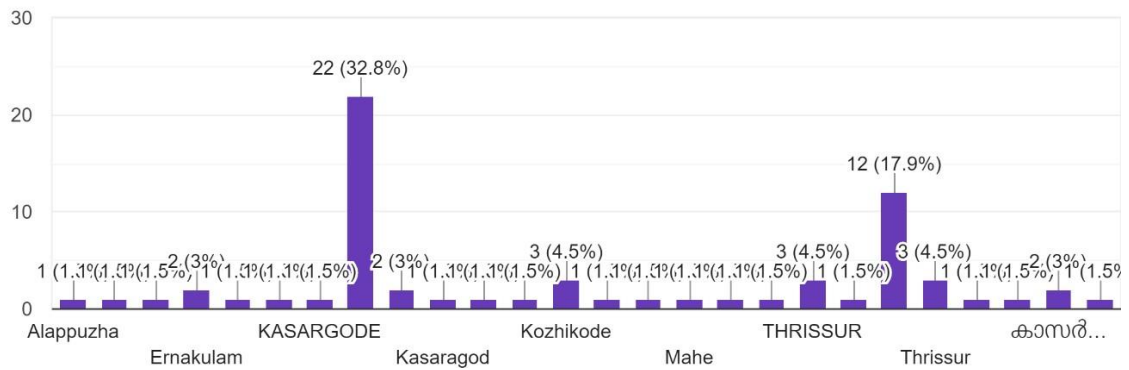
State?

67 responses



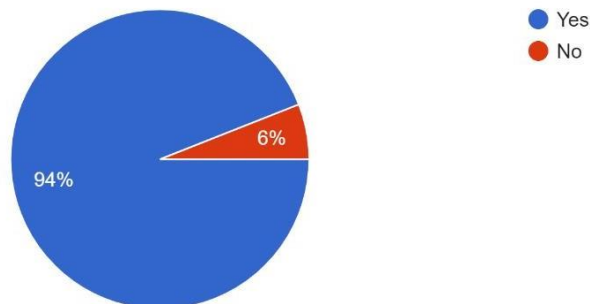
District?

67 responses



Do you like Theyyam Folklore art?

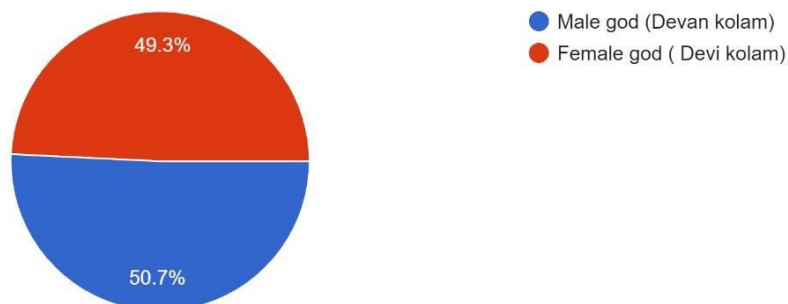
67 responses





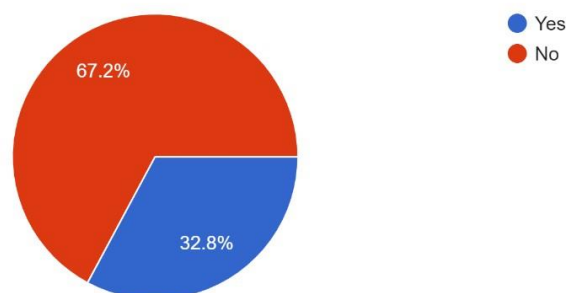
Which is your favorite Theyyam?

67 responses



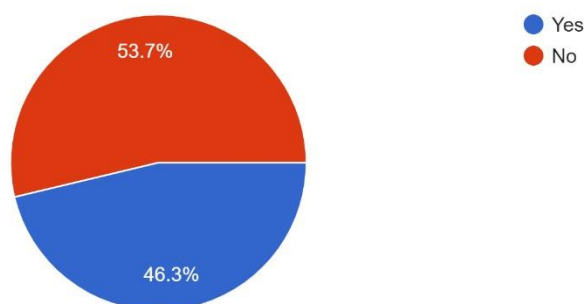
Can a women perform Theyyam in kavu?

67 responses



Do you support women to perform theyyam in kavu?

67 responses



Total 67 responses have been received in which 67.2 % male and only 31.3 % female are responded. Out of 67responses 32.8 % people from Kasaragod the main centre of Theyyam in Kerala.



94% of responders like Theyyam from which we can understand how generous Theyyam is. 50.7% responders like male Theyyam, but one thing here to think is most of the responders are male in this survey and though 49.3% people like female Theyyam.

67.2% of the responders agree that a woman cannot perform Theyyam in Kavu wherein 32.8% agree a woman can perform Theyyam in kavu and it may be in connection with Devakooth which is the only one Theyyam performing by a woman. Normally women never perform Theyyam in Kavu. 53.7 % of responders strongly expressed that they never support a woman to perform Theyyam in kavus as it is ritual art form connected with lifestyle.

### **WHY NOT WOMEN**

I have been contacted many Theyyam lovers, Folklorist and Theyyam performing artist over phone and discussed the matter. I am concluding this study by recording my findings about why women not performing Theyyam as below: -

#### **PHYSICAL ENERGY & STAMINA**

Theyyam is a ritual art form of Kerala (rather than a folklore art) which needs a very strong and healthy body. The belonging and decorations of Theyyam are very heavy and overall, more than 15 to 30 Kg in weight including head crown. Performing with all these for more than 16 to 24 hours is not a small thing. Normally due to this physical exercise ladies are not coming forward to perform.

#### **NENJEZHUTHU (THE DRAWINGS ON THE CHEST)**

Most of the Theyyam are having unique art drawings on the chest which sign differentiating one Theyyam to another. This is also one strong reason that Female are shy to come forward and not possible to draw on naked chest.

#### **HEALTH ISSUES**

Theyyam is a ritual art form which needs more than 24 hours dedication and need martial arts experiences turn over the fire etc. The decorations using over abdomen is very heavy and it causes severe back pain to ladies and sometimes minor disabilities to their uterus also. Hence it is not good to perform Theyyam by woman. I noticed that no one pointed the menstrual as reason for woman to perform Theyyam in temple. But most of them are very careful regarding the health of



a woman which does not allow them to perform Theyyam. In nutshell Theyyam is a male dominated only due to the physical stamina needed for the performance.

### **CONCLUSION:**

By doing this project work I do understand how much beautiful artform is Theyyam and wish to visit in every year. I invite you all to Kerala in the months of November to January for watching this beautiful art form in every year. “Why not women” is not a fully feminist oriented inscription. It discusses the numerous aspects of male domination in “Theyyam” performance. On penetrating more about “Why not Women”, I understood the real perseverance and feelings of people for “Theyyam”. Studies of rituals are of great relevance worldwide as they can reveal much about a society's worldview, belief systems, and life experiences, including mythology. This is not a project which discuss for gender equality. But this book can set up for modern thinking and scope for open discussion on the subject.

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