

Chilambu: A Research-Oriented Bharatanatyam Exploration of North Malabar's Thottam Pattu

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Abstract

Thottam Pattu is a traditional ballad form associated with Theyyam, the ritualistic art form of North Kerala, believed to have originated around the 13th or 14th century CE. As an invocatory hymn (Stotram), it is sung to praise the deity (Deivam) during the preparatory stages of Theyyam either the day before the performance or during the makeup ritual accompanied by percussive instruments such as Chenda and Tudi. Despite its cultural richness, Thottam Pattu remains largely inaccessible to outsiders, as Theyyam performances are confined to Kavu, Tharavadu, and Kazakam spaces within Kannur and Kasaragod districts. The ballads, composed in ancient Malayalam infused with Sanskrit, Dravidian, and Prakrit elements, encapsulate profound moral and social themes but are rarely documented due to their oral transmission within specific communities. This study seeks to decode and interpret Thottam Pattu as a cultural text and to explore its performative potential through Bharatanatyam choreography. By merging the narrative and emotive depth of Thottam with the expressive grammar of Bharatanatyam, this research aims to present a cross-cultural performance that bridges folklore and classical tradition, making the ethical and aesthetic essence of Theyyam accessible to a wider audience.

Keywords: Theyyam; Thottam Pattu; Bharatanatyam; Chilambu; Cross-cultural Performance; Kerala Folklore; Ritual Art; Pottan Theyyam; Ethnographic Study; Dance Research; Choreographic Interpretation; Cultural Identity; Caste and Society; Oral Tradition; Carnatic and Sopana Music; North Malabar; Performance Anthropology; Ritual Aesthetics; Folk-Classical Confluence.

Introduction

Thottam Pattu, the ritualistic ballad integral to the Theyyam tradition of North Kerala, serves as a sacred invocation sung to honor the deity before the performance. Rooted in oral heritage and community memory, it reflects the social consciousness, regional history, and moral philosophies embedded in Kerala's folklore. Each Theyyam is a living narrative of resistance, devotion, and divine justice its story recited through Thottam Pattu in rhythmic dialogue with percussive accompaniments. However, the esoteric nature of these performances, confined to sacred groves and family shrines, along with the linguistic complexity of ancient Malayalam, has limited wider comprehension and documentation.

Scholars like Dr. M. V. Vishnu Namboothiri have made initial efforts to interpret these texts, notably in Utharakerala Thottam Pattukal, yet much of this oral literature remains unexplored. This research attempts to decode and systematize the different varieties of Thottam across communities, offering both analytical and performative interpretations. In doing so, it proposes an innovative approach choreographing Thottam narratives through Bharatanatyam. As

Bharatanatyam already embraces Desi components such as Kavadi Chindu and Koravanji, and employs Stotra recitations within its repertoire, integrating Thottam Pattu offers a pioneering aesthetic dialogue. This cross-cultural synthesis aims to reimagine Theyyam's moral and social messages within the classical vocabulary of Bharatanatyam, expanding the communicative power of both art forms.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore Thottam Pattu the invocatory ballad tradition of Theyyam as both a cultural and performative text, and to reinterpret its expressive potential through Bharatanatyam. The specific objectives are:

1. To study the origin, structure, and linguistic features of Thottam Pattu, tracing its evolution within the ritualistic context of Theyyam in North Kerala.
2. To document and decode selected Thottam Pattus from various communities, analyzing their moral, social, and philosophical themes.
3. To examine the musical, rhythmic, and narrative dimensions of Thottam Pattu in relation to its ritual function.
4. To explore cross-cultural connections between Thottam Pattu and Bharatanatyam, particularly through shared elements such as Stotram, Desi components, and narrative abhinaya.
5. To develop a choreographic framework that integrates Thottam Pattu within the Bharatanatyam vocabulary, thereby presenting an innovative performative model.
6. To contribute to the preservation and dissemination of Thottam **Pattu** by translating its essence into a classical and globally accessible medium.

Theyyam: Historical Background

The origins of Theyyam, one of the most vibrant ritual art forms of North Kerala, are deeply intertwined with the region's social structure, spiritual beliefs, and hereditary traditions. Historical narratives and oral accounts trace its ritual organization to Manakkadan Kurukkal, a priestly figure associated with the Vannan caste, who played a vital role in systematizing Theyyam worship and performance.

According to traditional accounts, the ritual lineage of Theyyam is linked to the worship of Muppathi Aivara Kutti Paradevadar a group of thirty-six divine manifestations. The word Kutti here symbolizes infinity, suggesting that the number may not be literal but rather symbolic, representing an endless multitude of divine forms 360, 3600, 36,000, or even 360,000. These manifestations are believed to have been installed at the Kulom of Chirakkal Thamburan, one of the royal seats of Kolathunadu.

Historical and mythological traditions also attribute the structural organization of Theyyam performance to Veera Kolathiri Raja of Vaana Valarpattanam Kottayam. It is said that the king divided the ritual hierarchy into thirty-six sacred seats (peedams), distributing them among

various performer groups across four mandalams (spiritual quadrants) associated with the cosmic elements of Aditya (Sun), Chandra (Moon), Vishnu, and Vayu (Air).

The division of the sacred Peedams is traditionally described as follows:

1. **Kumbaza Chitrapeedam** – located at Kumbala
2. **Aybadi Chirapeedam** – situated in Kasaragod
3. **Madiyan Chitrapeedam** – centered around Nileshwaram and Trikkarippur
4. **Palli Chitrapeedam** – dedicated to the Palli Kulom of the Kolathiri royal family, representing both the **King and the Deity**

Out of these, thirty-five Peedams were assigned to performer communities, while one Peedam was reserved for the King and the divine presence symbolizing the unity of temporal power and spiritual authority in Theyyam’s cosmology.

An ancient ritual verse often recited in this context emphasizes the sacred tools and ornaments symbolizing the performer’s divine empowerment:

“Irippan peedam pidikkan aayudham,

Iduvan kanaga vala, Toduvan pon kuri,

Charthuvan swarna pattam.”

(“To hold the sacred seat, the weapon is raised;

To wear the golden bangle, to adorn the sacred mark;

To bind the golden crown in reverence.”)

This verse encapsulates the ritual sanctity and hierarchical organization of Theyyam, highlighting how each performer assumes not only the physical role of the deity but also the spiritual and moral responsibility associated with it.

Thus, the history of Theyyam reflects a fusion of divine myth, royal patronage, and community identity, forming a living tradition that continues to express Kerala’s unique blend of devotion, social structure, and artistic vision.

Chilambu – Working Process

Chilambu is a Bharatanatyam-based, research-oriented solo dance production conceptualized and choreographed as part of an ongoing exploration into the folklore and ritual traditions of North Malabar. The work was first set and presented in 2019 at major venues such as the Soorya Festival, Kerala Legislative Assembly, Cochin Biennale, Bangalore International Centre, Kerala Kalamandalam, Lasya Festival, and ICCR Swami Vivekananda Cultural centre – Colombo-Srilanka, marking the beginning of an artistic journey that bridges ritualistic expression and classical vocabulary.

The selected narrative for Chilambu draws from the Thottam of Pottan Theyyam, one of the most profound and socially conscious Theyyam traditions of North Kerala. The word Pottan

literally translates to “idiot,” yet within the Theyyam context, it represents a paradox an embodiment of divine wisdom masked by simplicity and sarcasm. Pottan Theyyam’s character oscillates between the comic, the philosophical, and the rebellious projecting wit, wisdom, and deep compassion for humanity.

In the Thottam, Pulamaruthan symbolizes Nandi, Pulapottan represents Shiva, and Pulachamundi embodies Parvathy. The narrative recounts a transformative episode in which Shiva, disguised as a Chandala (outcaste), encounters Adi Shankaracharya on his journey to attain ultimate wisdom at the Sarvajna Peetham. The encounter unfolds into a series of profound dialogues and philosophical arguments, where the Chandala questions Shankaracharya’s caste-based prejudice and challenges the illusion of social hierarchy. Through this divine confrontation, the insignificance of caste distinctions and the universality of human essence are powerfully revealed.

The Thottam includes verses that convey a piercing social message:

“Naankale kothiyalum chorale chovvare,

Neenkale kothiyalum chorale chora.”

(“When I am cut open, it is red blood that flows;

When you are cut open, is it not the same red blood, Master?”)

This poignant question raised by Pulapottan strikes directly at the heart of racism and casteism, serving as a timeless reminder of equality and shared humanity. The Thottam’s philosophical depth and emotional intensity provided the conceptual foundation for Chilambu, guiding its transformation from oral ritual to classical expression.

In this creative process, the choreographic framework sought to preserve the raw power and ritual essence of the Theyyam tradition while translating its themes through the codified technique of Bharatanatyam. The production interlaces abhinaya, nritta, and narrative interpretation with the rhythmic patterns of Thottam Pattu, supported by traditional percussion and melodic accompaniment to evoke the atmosphere of the sacred grove.

The realization of Chilambu was made possible with the collaboration and artistic support of a dedicated team: Gopi Vengara, Manu Rag, Sivej, Haridev, Sreerag, Kanhangad Ramachandran, Ashokan Talipparamba, Dr. Kalamandalam Latha Edavalath, and Dr. Kalakshetra Vidya Lakshmi, whose contributions enriched the musical, conceptual, and performative dimensions of the work.

Chilambu thus stands as an artistic experiment where the Thottam of Pottan Theyyam finds new life within the disciplined vocabulary of Bharatanatyam an intercultural dialogue that transcends boundaries of caste, language, and genre to convey a universal message of equality and wisdom.

Data Collection

The data for this study was gathered through a cross-cultural, ethnocentric, and experimental approach, combining field research with interpretative analysis. As the work explores the

transformation of Thottam Pattu a ritualistic ballad of Theyyam into the classical vocabulary of Bharatanatyam, the methodology required both ethnographical documentation and performative experimentation.

An ethnographical study was undertaken to understand the cultural, linguistic, and ritual contexts of Thottam Pattu. This involved direct engagement with the communities and performers who preserve this oral tradition. Collective interviews and interactive discussions were conducted with Theyyam artists, Thottam singers, local scholars, and language experts to decode the meanings, pronunciation, and rhythmic nuances embedded in the ballads.

The research also adopted an experimental artistic process, where insights from field observations were integrated into Bharatanatyam choreography. This practice-based inquiry served as both a mode of interpretation and validation, enabling a deeper understanding of how ritual performance can be translated into classical movement vocabulary without losing its cultural integrity.

Through this cross-disciplinary and community-based data collection, the study bridges folk and classical, oral and codified, and regional and universal perspectives making it possible to render the philosophical and social essence of Thottam Pattu through the expressive medium of Bharatanatyam.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis primarily involved decoding the Thottam Pattu interpreting its meaning, linguistic nuances, and uncovering the hidden stories embedded within its verses. As an orally transmitted tradition, each Thottam carries layers of metaphor, local history, and social commentary that required careful contextual study and interpretative listening. The researcher's foremost task was to understand the symbolic dimensions and moral essence of the Thottam, particularly as performed in the Pottan Theyyam tradition.

Field research identified significant regional and stylistic variations between Theyyam practices from Karyamkode to Valapattanam, which are regarded as among the most authentic zones of performance. The two primary stylistic schools are:

- Paleri Sampradayam (Kannur, Thalassery, Koothuparambu, Iritti): In this tradition, the Pottan Theyyam remains silent, emphasizing gesture and expression rather than speech.
- Vadakkan Sampradayam (Payyannur, Kasaragod, Azikode): This style allows greater vocal expression and narrative clarity, showing influence from northern ritual structures.

A third, Thekkan variation found around Thalassery, exhibits an intensified emotional and physical energy, representing a hybrid evolution of earlier styles.

The Pulaya community considers Pottan Theyyam as their own divine representation, while the Malaya community is renowned for performing it with unmatched depth and energy. Each community variation also shows distinct tune modulations and rhythmic patterns, revealing a complex musical diversity across regional practices.

The analytical process involved several stages:

1. Collection of oral material from performers and community elders.
2. Transcription and scripting of the Thottam texts from recorded interviews and performances.
3. Elimination of repetitive or non-relevant ritual segments while retaining the core narrative and musical elements.
4. Structural arrangement of the Thottam into a performable and interpretable format suitable for Bharatanatyam adaptation.

A critical aspect of analysis was the exploration of rāga and tāla correlations. The researcher studied the melodic contours of Thottam Pattu as sung by different communities and compared them with Carnatic and Kerala Sopāna music systems. This revealed an intriguing confluence between Carnatic rāga structures and Thottam tonalities, suggesting deep-rooted aesthetic linkages between folk and classical idioms.

The rhythmic study further identified unique and unconventional tāla patterns, often unnamed in traditional Theyyam contexts but organically formed through ritual movement and chanting. Through choreographic analysis, these rhythms were notated and codified in Bharatanatyam terms, including rare patterns such as 12 and 13-beat cycles, offering innovative rhythmic possibilities for experimentation.

Thus, the data analysis not only illuminated the layered meanings and musical architecture of Thottam Pattu but also established a foundation for its reinterpretation within the Bharatanatyam framework bridging the ritual and classical worlds through rhythm, melody, and movement.

Choreography

The choreographic process in Chilambu was envisioned as a dynamic translation of data into movement a continuum of Design, Analysis, and Coding, where the act of “dancing the data” became a methodological and interpretative approach. The choreography was not merely a representation of the Thottam Pattu, but a co-construction of knowledge through performance, engaging both analytical reasoning and embodied understanding.

The process began with a design phase, where the thematic essence and narrative layers of Pottan Theyyam were identified and mapped in relation to the Bharatanatyam framework. This was followed by the analysis phase, in which gestures, rhythms, and spatial motifs from Theyyam were studied and re-contextualized through classical technique. Finally, in the coding phase, these elements were systematized each movement phrase functioning as a symbolic code that conveyed layers of meaning derived from the original ritual context.

The choreography thus evolved as a co-construction of data a dialogue between the researcher-performer’s interpretative body and the cultural materials collected through fieldwork. This reflexive process involved a deep engagement with narratology and cultural reflection, where the performer’s identity and interpretative choices became part of the analytical framework. Through this lens, choreography emerged not as a fixed product but as an evolving narrative, shaped by interaction, reinterpretation, and lived experience.

To retain the aesthetic authenticity of Theyyam within a classical performance context, several ritual and symbolic elements were reimagined and integrated into the choreography:

- **Mirror looking (Kannadi nokkal):** Adapted as a metaphor for atma darshana (self-realization), symbolizing Shiva's recognition of the divine within the outcaste form.
- **Dikpalaka Vandana:** Incorporated as spatial motifs and salutations in eight directions, aligning Bharatanatyam's geometric symmetry with the cosmological balance central to Theyyam.
- **Agni Praveshana (entry through fire):** Translated into a kinetic sequence symbolizing purification and transcendence, using rhythmic intensity and circular movements to evoke the energy of the sacred fire.

These incorporations allowed the choreography to maintain the spiritual and symbolic power of the ritual, while situating it within the aesthetic and grammatical boundaries of Bharatanatyam. The use of Thottam Pattu as both text and soundscape provided an organic rhythm, guiding the body's responses to its linguistic and emotional resonances.

Through this experimental synthesis, the choreography of Chilambu became an embodied site of research, where Theyyam's performative essence met Bharatanatyam's structural precision. The result is an innovative form of cross-cultural dramaturgy a dialogue between sacred ritual and classical expression that invites audiences to experience both the intellectual depth and emotional power of Kerala's living traditions.

References and Inspirations

The creation of Chilambu and the accompanying research drew significant inspiration from earlier scholarly and performative works that explored intersections between mythology, social philosophy, and classical dance. These references provided both conceptual grounding and artistic direction for reimagining Thottam Pattu within the Bharatanatyam idiom.

One of the key inspirations was Dr. Vasundhara Doraiswamy's production *Draupadi*, which exemplifies the power of Bharatanatyam as a narrative and philosophical medium. Her interpretation of *Draupadi* as a symbol of feminine strength and social consciousness illuminated how classical dance could transcend aesthetics to engage with ethical and political discourse. This approach influenced Chilambu's treatment of Pottan Theyyam not merely as a ritual narrative but as a philosophical dialogue on caste, equality, and spiritual wisdom.

Another major influence was the doctoral research of Dr. Kalamandalam Latha Edavalath, whose extensive studies on Bharatanatyam pedagogy, regional aesthetics, and cross-cultural adaptation offered valuable insights into integrating Kerala's cultural idioms within classical frameworks. Her guidance also shaped the analytical depth and choreographic precision of Chilambu, ensuring that the fusion of Thottam and Bharatanatyam maintained both cultural authenticity and artistic discipline.

The thematic and conceptual richness of Lasya's *Pulijanmam Oru Puravritam* provided an additional source of inspiration. This work, rooted in the poetic and philosophical layers of Kerala's folklore, demonstrated how local myths could be reinterpreted in performative terms

to explore human conflict, transformation, and liberation. Its narrative depth and symbolic treatment of the marginalized resonated deeply with the ethos of Pottan Theyyam and informed the interpretative choices in Chilambu.

Together, these works served as intellectual and aesthetic reference points, shaping the evolution of Chilambu into a dance production that is not only a performance but also a research-driven dialogue between ritual, literature, and classical art.

Problems Faced

One of the most significant challenges encountered during this research was the continued sensitivity surrounding caste and community divisions within the cultural spaces where Theyyam and Thottam Pattu are practiced. Though these performances embody messages of equality and human unity, the social realities they question still persist. Approaching such themes as a researcher and performer required careful cultural negotiation and deep respect for traditional boundaries.

Another difficulty lay in accessing and decoding the oral tradition of Thottam Pattu. Since these songs are preserved within specific communities often by hereditary performers many are reluctant to share or perform them outside ritual contexts. The linguistic complexity of ancient Malayalam, infused with Sanskrit, Dravidian, and Prakrit elements, added to the challenge of accurate interpretation and translation. Moreover, the absence of written or recorded documentation made the process of collection, transcription, and contextual analysis time-consuming and demanding.

As a performer from Kannur, this project also carried a deeply personal dimension. It prompted the question, “What can I, as a daughter of this land, contribute to the preservation and reinterpretation of its heritage?” The moral and philosophical depth of Thottam Pattu deserves wider recognition, and the attempt to bring its values to the stage through Bharatanatyam became both a cultural responsibility and an act of identity reaffirmation.

Despite these challenges, this research stands as an influential and relevant contribution for the upcoming generation of artists and scholars. It demonstrates that traditional art forms can be revitalized not through imitation but through thoughtful reinterpretation revealing that the moral and social consciousness embedded in Thottam Pattu remains profoundly relevant to contemporary society.

Conclusion

This research-based dance production, Chilambu, stands as a creative and scholarly attempt to bridge the ritualistic depth of Theyyam and the codified structure of Bharatanatyam. Through the process of decoding, documenting, and choreographing Thottam Pattu, the study sought to preserve the oral legacy of North Kerala’s folklore while reinterpreting it in a classical and globally comprehensible language of movement.

The research journey revealed that Thottam Pattu is not merely a prelude to ritual but a philosophical text embedded with moral and social messages particularly its critique of caste hierarchy, human inequality, and spiritual ignorance. By translating these themes through

Bharatanatyam, Chilambu becomes an aesthetic dialogue between folk wisdom and classical refinement, where devotion, philosophy, and artistry coexist.

The integration of Thottam's rhythmic patterns, tonal variations, and expressive imagery into Bharatanatyam choreography required both analytical precision and emotional sensitivity. It involved not only reconstructing a traditional art form but also reimagining its spiritual and social essence through the lens of contemporary performance. The resulting production highlights how classical dance can become a medium of cultural translation one that sustains the integrity of indigenous traditions while opening new possibilities for interpretation.

As a dancer and researcher rooted in Kannur's cultural soil, this work reflects a personal and collective responsibility to revive, reinterpret, and represent the voices of the land that once resonated through Thottam Pattu. Beyond performance, Chilambu becomes a statement of cultural identity, social awareness, and artistic innovation.

In a world where ritual arts are often fading from collective memory, this research affirms that tradition thrives when reimagined with authenticity and purpose. The moral strength and universal humanism embedded in Theyyam and its Thottam continue to hold profound relevance today reminding us that art, in its truest form, is both prayer and protest, both reflection and revelation.

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