© Volume 2, Issue 11, November 2026 | JATIR
e-ISSN: 2839-5786, p-ISSN: 3139-8464

Embodied Colour: Myth, Meaning, and Metaphysics in Theyyam Art

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https://doi.org/10.64643/jatir.141264

***Abstract*—The ritual art of Theyyam, rooted in the tribal-Dravidian traditions of northern Kerala, offers a vivid interplay of colour, performance, and symbolism. This paper explores the deep aesthetic and cultural significance of the colour palette used in Theyyam, with particular focus on natural pigments and their ritualistic and psychological implications. Drawing from visual anthropology, folklore, and art history, the study decodes how colours like red, black, white, yellow, and green embody metaphysical meaning, spiritual transformation, and socio-political resistance. The performative use of colour not only animates divine presence but also reclaims marginalized identities through symbolic assertion. Theyyam emerges not merely as a spectacle, but as a living archive of community aesthetics, memory, and survival.**

***Index Terms*—Theyyam, Ritual Art, Colour Symbolism, Cultural Identity.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Theyyam, the ritual performance art of northern Kerala, is a vibrant testament to the spiritual, aesthetic, and socio-political life of its people. Deeply rooted in Dravidian traditions and tribal cosmologies, Theyyam transcends the conventional boundaries of art and religion. It is a ritual enactment of the divine, where myth and memory converge through rhythm, costume, and most powerfully, colour. These colours are not mere visual elements but symbolic devices charged with metaphysical and cultural meaning. As the performer dons the sacred hues of red, black, white, yellow, and green, the body is transformed into a site of cosmic expression, embodying divine energy, ancestral memory, and social commentary.

At the heart of Theyyam is the act of transformation, and colour plays a central role in facilitating this shift from the human to the divine. The use of natural pigments—like turmeric, rice powder, soot, lime, and herbal extracts—not only reflects an ecological sensitivity but also enacts an aesthetic of rootedness. Each colour carries its own symbolic language: red evokes power and sacrifice; black asserts Dravidian identity and resistance; white signals purity and transcendence; green and yellow invoke fertility, nature, and solar vitality. These hues are applied through intricate facial and body paintings (mukhathazhuthu and meyyezhuthu), which not only mark the performer's divine role but also narrate the cosmological and ethical values of the community.

This study explores how colour in Theyyam functions as both a cultural code and a metaphysical force. Drawing on folklore, anthropology, aesthetic theory, and indigenous epistemology, the paper examines how the world of colour in Theyyam reveals complex negotiations between nature and spirit, art and ritual, self and society. In doing so, it seeks to understand Theyyam not just as a performative tradition but as a visual philosophy—a chromatic archive of resistance, renewal, and transcendence.

II. ANTIQUITY OF THEYYAM FORMS – ENGLISH TRANSLATION

When we examine the ritual art forms of Kerala from ancient times, we find an interweaving of the fragrance of the soil and the resilience of its people. It is a reality that the aesthetic sensibility of a community—reflected in their sense of rhythm and colour—has been subtly embedded within the Theyyam ritual over generations. The costume concepts, ornamentation, and even the structuring of hair in Theyyam reflect the aesthetic consciousness of regional culture. By using natural, unrefined materials and earthy colour schemes, these ritual arts play a major role in giving shape to the distinctive aesthetic identity of a local culture.

Understanding a community becomes possible through the analysis of its ritual art forms. Often, to overcome the conflicts and pressures of material life, people create a parallel, metaphysical world—ritual arts frequently serve this very spiritual and symbolic function. Therefore, by studying these rituals and artistic expressions that embody the worldview and aesthetic ideals of a community, we can gain insight into its collective psyche.

One of the central concepts in the ancient human worship of anthropomorphic deities is the ritualistic re-creation of the human as a supernatural being. Through facial drawings, masks, body paintings, and ornamentation, the human form is transformed into a divine symbol, incorporating an aura of magical consciousness. The ritual thus becomes a symbolic response to the physical world, transforming material reality into a reflective and elevated state.

This paper seeks to investigate how organic colour consciousness and ornamental aesthetics are employed in such transformations. In northern Kerala, the period from the month of Thulam to Edavam is considered the Theyyam season. According to the traditional agrarian calendar, this is the time of harvest and agricultural abundance. Theyyam holds an unavoidable and essential place in the socio-cultural evolution of northern Malabar.

Tracing the history of such transformations reveals their deep-rooted ancestry in tribal-Dravidian traditions. Costumes similar to Theyyam and figures resembling its elaborate hair designs can be seen in the Edakkal cave paintings, which are remnants of the Neolithic age. E.M. Forster opines that some of these symbols represent ancient spirit dances. (C.R. Rajagopalan, 2011: 80)

The ancient Tamil grammar treatise Tolkappiyam also mentions that aesthetic ideals vary according to natural landscapes and associated deities, each favouring particular colours. Understanding a community is therefore possible through the examination of its beliefs and life practices. The reflection of a colour-rich cosmos becomes the cultural identity of a society. Such an inquiry into colour leads us to the worldview and belief systems associated with that society. In this way, the colour concepts evolve into the ever-resonating palettes of the nature-culture heritage. The unique world of colours created through facial painting, adornments, and costumes in Theyyam performances conveys an ineffable emotional experience under the glow of fire. The belief underlying this interplay is that the fertility of nature and human fertility are interconnected and can influence each other. This is evident in the ritual art forms of a people who worshipped nature and embraced agriculture as a way of life, showing how their perception of nature's colours influenced their art.

Elements of nature and agricultural life are embedded in the aesthetic concepts reflected in Theyyam's makeup, ornaments, and colour sense. While divinity is invoked through the auditory power of Thottam songs and musical instruments, it is through visual power—like meyy ezhuthu (body painting), mukhathezhuthu (facial painting), and poimukham (false face/mask)—that the divine presence is visually awakened. The traditions of facial and body painting preserve the earliest forms of Kerala's visual art. Even today, natural dyes, colour powders, and brushes derived from nature continue to be used in Theyyam performances.

The ancient surfaces of Kerala's painting tradition were earth and stone. Over time, these have transformed into surfaces such as floors, walls, wood, leaves, and the human face. It is through the mukhathezhuthu and meyyezhuthu of Theyyam that this visual tradition has survived as a ritual legacy.

The colours used in Kerala’s traditional art are not only derived from nature but also carry specific symbolic meanings. For example:

- Earth is represented by yellow (in circular form),
- Water is white (in triangular form),
- Fire is black (in spiral form),
- Wind is red (dense in texture),
- Sky is dark green or bluish (square in form).

(As noted by M.V. Vishnunamboothiri, 2008: 48)

Thus, yellow symbolizes the earth, white for water, green for sky, and red represents wind or passion. “Shāndra colour” suggests a dense red tone, attributed to air. The transition from black to white metaphorically represents a progression from tamas (inertia) through rajas (activity) to sattva (purity or clarity).

According to the Nātyaśāstra (the classical treatise on dramaturgy), green represents love (śṛṅgāra), white for laughter (hāsya), yellow for wonder (adbhuta), red for anger (raudra), and black for fear (bhayānaka). However, the colour universe of Theyyam communicates meanings in a different way. The colours used in Theyyam are psychologically constructed to evoke superhuman and hallucinatory experiences. The world of colours expressed through mukhathezhuthu plays a major role in elevating the performer from the material to the metaphysical realm.

The five primary colours in Theyyam facial painting—yellow, red, green, black, and white—are essential. These are made from natural substances such as:

- Yellow turmeric powder
- White rice flour
- A mixture of turmeric and lime (producing red)
- Powder from vakayila leaves (green)
- Charcoal powder
- Red pigment (chāyilyam)
- Soft white clay (manayola)

In earlier times, colour stones and leaf extracts were used to create this colourful marvel on the face of the Theyyam performer.

The response to colours and their symbolism is shaped by cultural structures. In cultural contexts, colour functions as a symbolic reflection and becomes a part of sociological inquiry. These emerge from the spontaneous actions of the mind embedded within the biological framework, manifesting through a natural evolution of form. These colours are capable of transcending both nature and human nature, thereby creating a supernatural or metaphysical experience.

III. THE WORLD OF COLOURS IN THEYYAM MAKEUP – TRANSLATION (ENGLISH)

When the worldview and imagination of a people are transformed into artistic expression, it also marks a distinct cultural perspective. The visual language of mukhathezhuthu (facial painting) in Theyyam art is one where wildness and simplicity merge on the same plane. The structures created through a fusion of colour and form carry expressive power. Colours like red, black, and white are considered essential in this art form, as they enhance emotional expression. These colours often appear in combination not only in makeup but also in costumes and ornaments. Such colour associations create a tension between objectivity and subjectivity.

Like every art form has its own style and character, its meaning and visual impact also depend on the time and place in which it exists. Theyyam transcends the material realm to reach a metaphysical plane. Kandinsky opines that both colour and sound have the ability to touch the soul. Lévi-Strauss states that even in tribal traditions, colours reflect philosophical thinking and cultural heritage. (C.R. Rajagopalan, 2011:150) Red has long been symbolised as a sign of power, victory, and joy. In ritual arts, Lévi-Strauss suggests that colours can convey spiritual messages and moral values.

He further notes that colours also function as geographic symbols—yellow for north, blue for west, red for south, and white for east. Red symbolises justice, courage, and emotional intensity; green indicates rage; red can represent cruelty; white stands for hypocrisy; black signifies rootedness in nature.

When examining the aesthetic ideas behind ritualistic Theyyam art in northern Kerala, one finds the warmth and rawness of human breath embedded in it. While classical art forms like dance, architecture, and painting have formalised theories of aesthetics, Theyyam's aesthetic sense is inherited from folk traditions and shaped by the tastes of ordinary people. In ritualistic art that imparts spiritual experience, the use of colour becomes a signifier of formal diversity and structural presence.

In Theyyam, the performers (kolakkarans) often belong to castes outside the traditional varnashrama system. Black is a Dravidian colour, and while ancient communities accepted it as a fundamental part of reality, they sanctified it by smearing their bodies with arichanthu (a type of soot paste). This act marks the first step from the physical to the metaphysical. While white symbolises fertility, reactions to colours and their perceived negativity are shaped by cultural systems.

Because of its symbolic value, colour becomes a subject of sociological inquiry. White Bhutam, Kathivannur Veeran, Kannikkoru Makan, Bhairavan, Nagarajav, Pottantheyyam, Gulikkan, and Palanthayi Kannan apply arichanthu to their bodies. In contrast, Muthappan, Thiruvappan, and Antithira Theyyams use a mixture of arichanthu and turmeric. Colours are capable of expressing deep human emotions. The act of smearing arichanthu can be seen as an attempt to transcend one's human identity and reach a spiritual plane.

In ancient China, white on the face represented deception. In modern European contexts, colours are associated with virtues: white with purity, red with desire, and green with life. (K.V. Dileep Kumar; The Language of Colour: The Folk Colour World)

In Theyyam, the white base applied as meyyezhuthu (body painting) signifies purity and sanctity. Yet, cultural conditioning often leads to the concealment of black and submission to white. Arichanthu also has a cooling effect, regulating body heat. A paste made of ground rice, camphor, and herbal juices further reduces body temperature. Still, meleri chadunna theyyangal (those who leap on platforms) smear their bodies with arichanthu even in the chill of the Vrischikam month (November–December), showing their harmony with nature.

Even when white is painted on the body, some Theyyams represent the dominance of black. For some, black is not just a colour symbol but a defining feature of their divine identity. Ankakkaran Theyyam paints his body with red and black, representing the Dravidian identity and resisting Aryan dominance. In the sacred darkness lit by fire torches, the wrathful expressions of such Theyyams are amplified by the thick, striking shapes of the black-painted eyes. Large circular eyes and black dots (chottakkuri) evoke grotesque intensity.

They paint around the eyes with carbon black, creating an effect the size of a hen's egg. For Theyyams like Wayanattukulavan, the forehead is adorned with a crown-shaped black mark. Over the white base (manayola), long oval shapes are drawn around the eyes with chayilyam (red

pigment). From the forehead to the nose, flower patterns (chullipoovukal) in red and black are painted. The facial design of Vishnumoorthi Theyyam includes a rooster flower and kodumpurikkam. The kodumpurikkam is drawn above the eye using black pigment in the shape of the Malayalam letter "ഗ". Such designs intensify the wrathful expression and evoke fear and devotion among viewers.

The structural presence created by the fusion of colour and form carries significant expressive potential. In Theyyams, where wildness and simplicity merge, a mystical atmosphere is created. Just like the rhythmic power of music, colour combinations recreate a symbolic language that captivates the audience. Black represents anger and fear. Colours that evoke supernatural and hallucinatory experiences are psychologically embedded in Theyyam performances.

IV. THE PHYSICAL AND METAPHYSICAL DIMENSIONS OF COLOUR CONSCIOUSNESS

In the ritual art of Theyyam, where black and red dominate as the principal colours, we witness a reclamation of the cultural identity of regional traditions. The intensity of violence and ferocity represented in these colours reflects a form of resistance. Frantz Fanon observes that retrieving the existence of blackness is not about whitening it, but rather recognizing its power (C.R. Rajagopalan, 2011: 80–81). Such expressions of violence can be interpreted as symbols of freedom.

When cultural consciousness seeks to assert dominance over indigenous people through colour fetishism and exploitation, Theyyam becomes a medium through which the oppressed reclaim their identity. The fondness for red also marks a continuity with ancient colour consciousness; even during the tribal age, red had a recognized symbolic significance (C.R. Rajagopalan, 2011: 20). As one of the first colours to astonish early humans, the colour of blood was held in high regard across ancient societies.

Studies in ancient occult traditions reveal that red possessed a magical, hypnotic power. In animal sacrifice rituals, the mixing of turmeric and lime into the sacrificial paste (kuruthi or gurusi) was believed to induce altered states of mind. In Theyyam, not just on the face but also in ornamentation, red dominates. The colour of blood was believed to impart vigour and vitality. Red, representing life, is also present in the sacred flower Thechi (Ixora coccinea), used in ritual worship.

The expressive potential of red in Theyyam is enhanced by pigments like manayola and chayilyam, which help portray both gentle and fierce emotions in the vivid, inexpressible hue of fire. In the decorative fabrics (kaani) used at Theyyam sites, and in the interplay of form and colour, one can observe the influence colour has in shaping form. The mingling of red, black, and white in these elements under the flickering flames of oil torches amplifies the emotional atmosphere of Theyyam performances.

The black colour, identified as a Dravidian tone, underlies even divine iconography and is rooted in a psychological and hierarchical mindset. Here, black becomes more than a colour—it becomes

a defining physical attribute. Red, the colour of birth-blood and destruction, contains within it both tender affection and wrathful fury. The Theyyam figure, embodying both a destructive force and a symbol of fertility, represents the fierce potential of both the soil and the feminine principle. The chromatic amalgamation of red and black echoes the colour of the fierce goddess Kali in primal Dravidian consciousness.

Accordingly, the writing and decoration on the body are categorised based on the fierce or benign mood they convey. Variants include mascara lines around the eyes, moustaches painted with chayilyam, forehead symbols like crescents, chakras, flowers, and geometric lines drawn in circles or squares—all identifying the unique types of Theyyams. In Impressionist art, red symbolises blood, fire, passion, destruction, and creation—meanings that also apply here.

The emotional resonance of red, black, and white empowers expressive energy. These colours are mingled even in the cloth (kaani) and attire, symbolising the tension between objectivity and subjectivity. The imagery they generate reflects a synthesis of the physical and metaphysical realities of space and time.

V. TRANSLATION – THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NATURAL COLOURS IN THEYYAM MAKEUP

Natural colours such as turmeric powder, rice powder, a mixture of turmeric and lime, betel leaf powder, soot powder, chayilyam (red pigment), and manayola (yellow pigment) are blended with coconut oil to create the colour mixture used in Theyyam makeup. Manayola is symbolically associated with truth and prosperity. Colour pastes made with green and white manayola are applied to the face and body. The hue of manayola embodies charm and beauty, while the green shade represents an abundance of life energy.

When the worldview and imagination of a community transform into artistic expression, it signifies a powerful cultural consciousness. In the ritual art of Theyyam, the preference for yellow must be interpreted within this framework. Communities like the Vannan and Malayan extract juice from fresh turmeric paste ground in a mortar and pestle, known as manchana, which is used for the body painting (theppu) of Theyyams like Kathivannur Veeran and Puthiya Bhagavathi.

Ancient communities believed that nature's fertility and human fertility were interlinked, and that one could influence the other. They practiced rituals to sustain this belief. Being nature-worshippers and agriculturalists, their ritual art was naturally influenced by their colour consciousness related to the environment. The fiery hue of flame and the green of nature have always played an influential role in the aesthetics of Theyyam.

In Theyyam performance, yellow is an essential colour used extensively in meyyazhuthu (body painting) and mukhathazhuthu (facial painting), especially in patterns that bless or sanctify. From the tribal era itself, yellow has been widely used in religious ceremonies. It is said that yellow symbolises strength, and among the Naidu community, garments soaked in turmeric are traditionally worn (K.P. Dileep Kumar, 2008: 43).

Painters regard yellow as a symbol of solar radiance. The sun, which fertilises the earth, is represented through the cultural acceptance of yellow. Studies have shown that yellow not only enhances wisdom and joy but also encourages trust, peace, and fulfilment (Muttath Chandran, 2008: 52). The facial painting usually begins with a thin layer of pale yellow manayola as a base coat. Among agricultural labourers working under the scorching sun, yellow holds an important place as a colour of stimulation in their aesthetic imagination.

From as early as the Sangam period, yellow was associated with the Dravidian racial identity. Turmeric powder is also used for enhancing beauty and is considered auspicious. As a ritual substance, when turmeric is applied to the body, it indicates a connection between taste and colour. The brilliance that emerges when red and yellow are placed side by side is notable. The coordination of rhythm and colour, both in ritualistic and magical dimensions, reveals the distinct expressive language of indigenous people.

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, facial symbolism in ritual makeup produces a magical aesthetic experience. Artists testify that the colourful world of facial painting, which continues the shamanistic practices of primal cultures, brings mental satisfaction to the rural public. The orange hue formed by the fusion of yellow and red is symbolically associated with energy and is also conceived as a healing colour.

Another colour that influences Theyyam art is green. As a symbol of nature and fertility, green is used in the facial makeup of Theyyams like Manchunathan and Vettakkorumakan. Some Theyyams, representing agricultural symbols, use powdered tender coconut leaves both as body decoration and attire. While this may help protect from the heat of fire, it also reflects the cultural inspiration drawn from diverse agrarian traditions. Materials that are not naturally derived are rarely used in ritual practices. Most Theyyams with bold colour schemes also feature green elements made from tender coconut leaves (kuruthola), reinforcing a visual association with fertility and nature.

Along with imparting a spiritual experience, the incorporation of greenery into colour symbolism reveals the depth to which rural communities internalise aesthetic awareness through nature. By observing the world of colours in Theyyam art, we can understand how certain communities, who invoke the sun that fertilizes the earth through rituals like the choottukettu (fire barrier), transcend dominant power structures and establish beauty ideals and survival strategies rooted in their own psychological consciousness.

This colour universe can also be interpreted as a complex symbolic language of hidden meanings. Studying the colours used in Theyyam—its ritual art, facial painting (mukhathazhuthu), and costumes—along with the psychology of colour, deepens and broadens our understanding of Kerala's traditional arts, cultural practices, and their evolution. An in-depth exploration of colours enables a richer comprehension of Theyyam as a ritualistic art form.

VI. CONCLUSION

The ritual tradition of Theyyam is a confluence of colour, form, and meaning. As a living heritage of Kerala's indigenous communities, it represents not just artistic expression but also a profound

worldview where nature, spirit, and society are seamlessly interwoven. The use of natural colours—derived from turmeric, soot, leaf extracts, and lime—connects the performer to the land, reinforcing fertility, vitality, and divine presence.

This study reveals that the colour schemes in Theyyam are far from arbitrary; they serve as visual metaphors for psychological states, cosmological beliefs, and cultural hierarchies. Red symbolises life, power, and sacrifice; black asserts Dravidian identity and resistance; white suggests sanctity and social conditioning; while yellow and green evoke fertility and nature's abundance. Through these colours, the human body becomes a canvas of spiritual and political expression.

Facial and body painting in Theyyam thus become not only aesthetic practices but also rituals of transformation—enabling performers and viewers alike to transcend the material world. Colour, here, is not mere decoration but a semiotic force that channels emotion, memory, and cultural resilience. The symbolic language of colour in Theyyam performances holds the potential to challenge dominant narratives and reaffirm indigenous epistemologies.

By exploring the world of colours in Theyyam, we do more than understand a tradition—we read the collective psyche of a people who speak through flames, earth, rhythm, and hue. In that reading lies a deeper recognition of art as resistance, ritual as remembrance, and colour as cultural consciousness.

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