

## Chapter 14

# Rituals Manifest Spatially: Spatial Mapping of Culture: A Case of Theyyam

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### Introduction

Theyyam is a vibrant ritualistic art form performed in Kerala, India, and this essay explores its various manifestations using cultural mapping techniques. By employing the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, along with the concepts of cultural corridors and cultural clusters, the essay delves into the historical development, cultural significance, and contemporary challenges faced by Theyyam.

Through spatial mapping, this research provides valuable insights into cultural preservation, community engagement, and urban planning. A newly created spatial map of Theyyam performances in the Kannur district highlights the distribution of Muchilot Bhagavati Theyyam temples, based on data from expert interviews and primary research sources. This map reveals the distribution patterns and characteristics of practitioners, emphasizing the deep connection between the performances and the cultural heritage of North Kerala.

The pulsating narratives and masked performances of Theyyam not only captivate audiences but also reflect the cultural heritage, religious faith, and social identity of the region. This essay emphasizes the importance of understanding the spatial aspects of Theyyam through cultural mapping, where community members document and analyze the distribution of practices and their meanings. The HUL approach recognizes that cultural practices are influenced by their historical context, while cultural corridors examine the networks linking Theyyam performances across villages and temples. Cultural clusters focus on geographical concentrations of performances within specific communities or traditions.

A mixed-method design, including archival research, spatial data collection, and fieldwork interviews with performers, community members, and local experts, was used in this study. The aim is to uncover the deeper meanings behind the spaces occupied by Theyyam, offering a comprehensive examination of its dimensions within its alluring world.

This research not only sheds light on the specific cultural phenomenon of Theyyam but also contributes to broader discussions in anthropology, cultural studies, and geography. It underscores the importance of rituals in maintaining cultural heritage and shaping the identities and experiences of the communities that practice them.

### Theyyam

Theyyam, a traditional ritual performance of North Kerala in India, involves performers dressing up as gods or goddesses in elaborate costumes and make-up. This has been the traditional belief among many other peoples who believed that deities entered into these performers during ritual performances like dancing. Spatial mapping of Theyyam can serve several purposes. Firstly, it can help to preserve this important cultural tradition. The whole system of Theyyam is complex and highly nuanced, thus its decay or obliteration may happen over time. By creating a record of Theyyam performances, spatial mapping can contribute to documenting and educating future generations about this tradition.

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Secondly, spatial mapping can provide insights into the meaning and significance of Theyyam. Better understanding of Theyyam is possible through movement mapping by performers themselves, community music and movements. This information can be used to improve the performance of Theyyam and make it more accessible to a wider audience.



**Figure 1.** Muchilottu Bhagavathi Theyyam from 2024 (Primary survey-Localities of Kannur).

## Muchilottu Bhagavathi Theyyam

Muchilottu Bhagavathi Theyyam is a vibrant and significant performance deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the Vaniya community in the North Malabar region of Kerala, India. This Theyyam ritual centers around the worship of Muchilottu Bhagavathi, a powerful goddess regarded as the protector and tutelary deity of the Vaniya community. According to legend, Lord Shiva created Muchilottu Bhagavathi for the well-being of humanity, sending her to earth on a golden chariot. She is believed to have landed at the residence of a soldier from the Muchilot clan, thus deriving her name.

The worship of Muchilottu Bhagavathi holds profound significance for the Vaniya community, which comprises nine different illams or ancestral homes. According to lore, a learned Brahmin girl from Perinjellur village faced ostracism and was forced to leave her village. During her wanderings, she prayed at the Shiva temples of Karivellur and Rayaramangalam. In a moment of desperation, she prepared a bonfire to immolate herself. At that moment, a Vaniyan, carrying oil, passed by, and she requested him to pour the oil into the bonfire to fulfill her last wish. The Vaniyan complied, and the girl, who had prayed to Lord Shiva, was elevated to divinity with His blessings after her death.

Muchilottu Bhagavathi is revered by people of all castes and faiths, who seek her blessings for prosperity and well-being. The performance aspects of Muchilottu Bhagavathi Theyyam are known for their beauty and gentle movements, performed exclusively by members of the Vaniya community. An integral part of the ritual is the serving of food, symbolizing community bonding and the sharing of blessings.

In essence, Muchilottu Bhagavathi Theyyam is not just a ritualistic performance but a celebration of cultural heritage, embodying the deep spiritual and communal values of the Vaniya community. The captivating narratives and graceful movements of this Theyyam reflect the community's reverence for their deity and the enduring legacy of their traditions.

### Material and Methods

Cultural mapping refers to the process of analyzing the physical, three-dimensional or cognitive and mind mapping of heritage and related systems. This approach can be highly beneficial in developing communication strategies that promote social cohesion, economic growth, tourism initiatives, and preservation management for collections.

The study uses mixed methods, utilizing the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore detailed aspects of Them rituals in different areas of Kerala, India This methodology has three main components.

1. Fieldwork: This involves conducting interviews with various stakeholders to gain direct insights into theyyam practices. The target audience includes performers, who can provide details of rituals performed and local meanings, community members, who can provide perspectives on cultural and social meanings a linked to spatial aspects of themselves, and local experts, such as historians or anthropologists You can provide.

2. Spatial data collection: This component uses GIS tools to map different spatial features associated with their customs. This could include mapping play areas including sacred trees, temples and other ritual sites, mapping the ways feasts and rituals In addition, also mapping places associated with rituals about, such as churches or important trees, to create a comprehensive spatial picture of their behavior

3. Record research: This includes examining historical records and documents relating to Theym, as well as local culture. This may involve examining manuscripts, colonial records, or other relevant sources to gain a deeper understanding of the historical context and spatial aspects of Theym rituals.

By combining these three methods, the research aims to achieve a rich and nuanced understanding of the spatial dimensions of Theyyam rituals. The fieldwork provides qualitative data on the lived experiences and perspectives of those involved in Theyyam, while the spatial data collection offers a visual representation of the geographical spread and interconnectedness of the rituals. Finally, the archival research provides historical context and insights into the long-standing relationship between Theyyam and the spatial landscape.

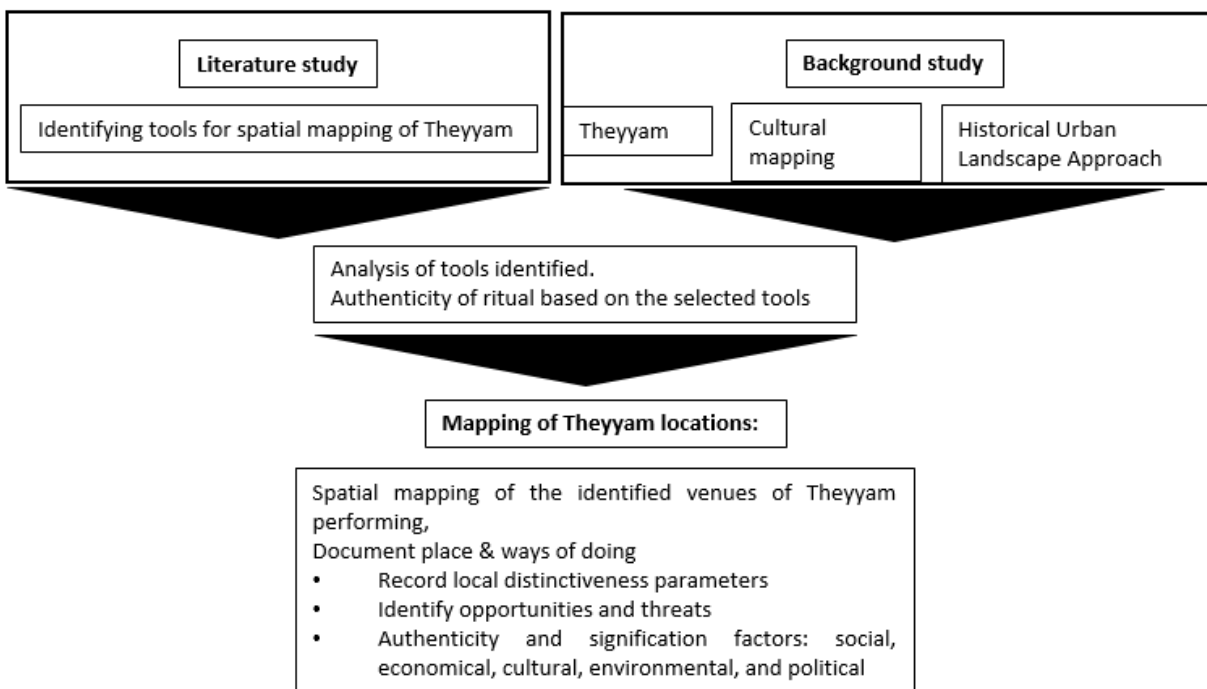


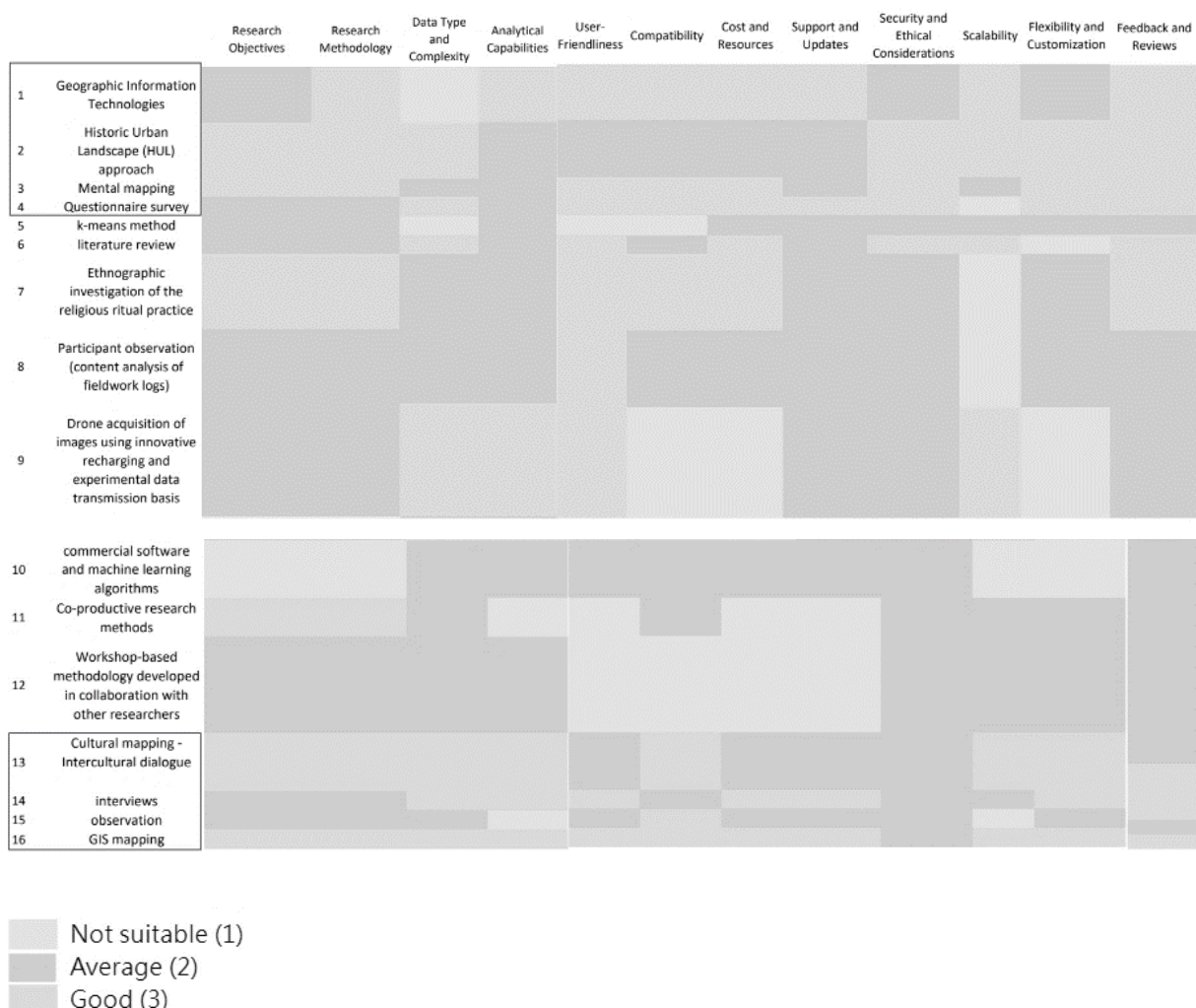
Figure 2. Structure of the Study (Developed by Author).

### Gathering Datasets

Unveiling the intricate web of connections, cultural corridors act as the arteries of Theyyam. Mapping these performance routes reveals not only historical ties between villages and temples, but also the very lifeblood of this tradition - the movement of performers, audiences, and ritual objects. These corridors transcend mere paths, becoming threads binding communities together, often weaving through sacred groves and significant natural features that imbue the rituals with deeper symbolic meaning.

Delving deeper, cultural clusters emerge as constellations of Theyyam practices across the landscape. Each cluster, a microcosm of tradition, showcases variations in styles, rituals, and deities, reflecting the unique cultural tapestry of different regions. By tracing the evolution of these clusters through time, we gain insight into the dynamic history and adaptation of Theyyam. Moreover, these clusters serve as mirrors reflecting social

networks and power dynamics within communities, illuminating the diverse expressions and practices that make Theyyam such a vibrant and multifaceted art form.



**Figure 3.** Analysis of tools identified for spatial mapping of Theyyam (Developed by Author from literature study).

The table lists fourteen research methods that could be used to study Theyyam spatially. Each method is given a row in the table. The columns of the table provide information about the following:

1. Research Objectives: The goals of the research method
2. Research Methodology: The overall approach used
3. Data Type: The kind of information collected
4. Analytical Capabilities: How the data is analyzed
5. User Friendliness: How easy it is to use the method
6. Compatibility: How well the method works with other tools
7. Cost and Resources: How much money and time it takes to use the method
8. Updates: How often the method is improved
9. Ethical Considerations: How the method protects people’s privacy
10. Security: How safe the method is from errors
11. Scalability: How well the method works for large studies
12. Flexibility: How adaptable the method is to different situations
13. Feedback and Reviews: How well-regarded the method is

Here are some of the specific observations that can be made from the table:

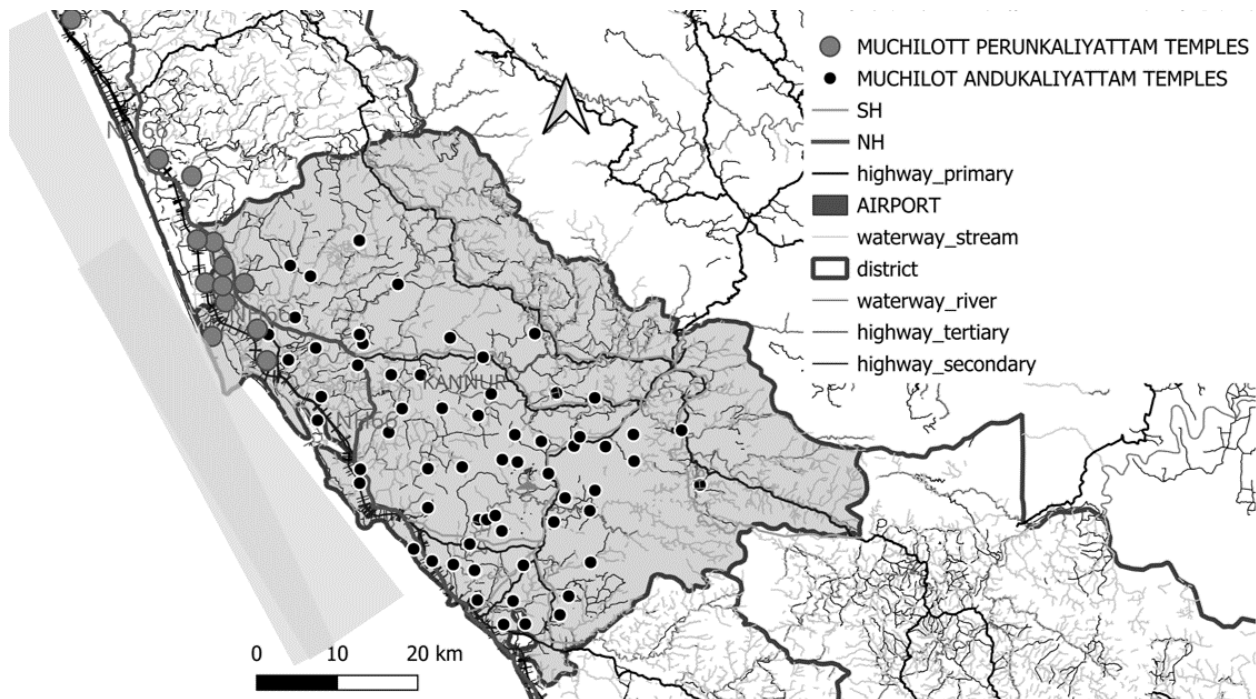
1. Ethnographic investigation appears to be a good option for research on Theyyam, as it is rated highly in all but two categories (Data Type and Analytical Capabilities).
2. Drone acquisition of images is rated highly in terms of Analytical Capabilities and User Friendliness, but it is also rated as expensive and not very compatible with existing resources.
3. Co-productive research methods appear to be a good option for researchers who are interested in working collaboratively with others.

01	HERITAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping sacred spaces</li> <li>• Protection of sacred groves, temples, and other designated spaces</li> <li>• Preserving tangible and intangible heritage</li> </ul>
02	ECONOMIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic opportunities for local communities</li> <li>• Promoting tourism &amp; local economy</li> </ul>
03	ENVIRONMENTAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protection of sacred groves, temples, and other designated spaces</li> <li>• Protection of community spaces from the future developments.</li> </ul>
04	SOCIO-CULTURAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing communities to share their cultural heritage with a wider audience</li> <li>• Promoting cultural exchange &amp; cultural identity</li> <li>• Fostering sustainable development in Theyyam communities</li> </ul>

**Figure 4.** Layers of city (landscape of Theyyam) - according to HUL approach (Developed by Author).

Spatial mapping is a powerful tool for preserving and promoting cultural identity in Theyyam communities. It helps preserve traditions, visual storytelling, and promote community cohesion and tourism. Theyyam performances often take place in sacred spaces, such as groves and temples, which can be documented and preserved. Virtual tours of these villages can also attract tourists, providing economic opportunities and cultural exchange. However, challenges include community involvement, data privacy and ownership, and sustainability. Communities should have control over their data collection, storage, and use, and clear guidelines should be established for data privacy and ownership. Long-term sustainability of spatial mapping projects requires capacity building within communities to manage and maintain the maps. The environmental significance of Theyyam is also significant. Theyyam performances often take place in sacred groves or near natural landmarks, representing the deities that performers represent. Threats to the environment, such as deforestation, pollution, and climate change, can negatively impact the performance and health of these communities. Spatial mapping can be used to document and monitor environmental changes, raising awareness of threats and developing conservation strategies. Overall, spatial mapping is a valuable tool for strengthening social ties, promoting cultural identity, and fostering sustainable development in Theyyam communities.





**Figure 5.** Spatial mapping of temples performing Muchilottu Bhagavathi Theyyam (Developed by Author).

Andukaliyattam and Perumkaliyattam are significant ritualistic festivals associated with the worship of Muchilottu Bhagavathi, a revered deity in the Theyyam pantheon of Kerala, India. These festivals hold immense cultural and spiritual importance for the Vaniya community, who are the primary custodians of this unique art form.

#### ***Andukaliyattam:***

Andukaliyattam, meaning "festival of the inner sanctum," is a relatively short festival, typically spanning over two to three days. It is observed annually at the Muchilottu Bhagavathi Kavu, the main temple dedicated to the deity in Payyannur, Kannur district.

**Key Features of Andukaliyattam:**

**Invocation:** The festival begins with the invocation of various deities and spirits, seeking their blessings for the successful conduct of the rituals.

**Theyyam Performances:** Andukaliyattam features a series of Theyyam performances, each depicting a specific deity or mythological character. These performances are accompanied by traditional music and percussion.

**Offerings:** Devotees offer various items to the deity during the festival.

#### ***Perumkaliyattam:***

Perumkaliyattam, meaning "grand festival," is a much more elaborate and extended celebration, typically lasting for seven to ten days. It is held once in twelve years, marking a significant occasion in the devotional calendar of the Vaniya community.

**Key Features of Perumkaliyattam:**

**Preparations:** Elaborate preparations precede the Perumkaliyattam, including the construction of temporary performance spaces and the gathering of ritualistic materials.

**Theyyam Processions:** Perumkaliyattam features grand processions of Theyyam figures, accompanied by traditional music and dance. These processions attract large crowds of devotees and spectators.

**Rituals and Offerings:** Numerous rituals and offerings are performed throughout the festival, seeking divine blessings for the community's well-being and prosperity.

**Cultural Significance:** Perumkaliyattam serves as a powerful platform for showcasing the rich cultural heritage of the Vaniya community and reinforcing their deep connection with the deity Muchilottu Bhagavathi.

Both Andukaliyattam and Perumkaliyattam play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting the Theyyam tradition to future generations. They provide a vibrant space for community engagement, spiritual expression, and cultural celebration.

## Discussion and Conclusion

By weaving together cultural mapping, the HUL approach, cultural corridors, and cultural clusters, this research unveils the profound ways Theyyam manifests spatially. This multifaceted approach yields invaluable insights: a deeper understanding of Theyyam's historical development, its geographical context, and its crucial role in shaping local identities. By pinpointing cultural corridors and clusters, the research informs conservation strategies, safeguarding Theyyam's heritage and ensuring its vibrant continuity. Furthermore, mapping projects actively engage local communities, empowering them to document their cultural heritage and advocate for its preservation. Finally, the spatial analysis gleaned from this research aids in informed urban planning decisions, ensuring that Theyyam's cultural significance is respected and integrated into the evolving urban landscape. This comprehensive approach goes beyond mere documentation, offering a powerful tool for understanding, preserving, and celebrating the unique spatial dimensions of Theyyam.

Spatial mapping, informed by the concepts explored in this paper, transcends mere location identification. It unveils the intricate relationship between Theyyam and the spatial landscape, offering valuable insights for cultural preservation, community engagement, and informed urban planning. As Theyyam is context specific, spatial mapping can serve as a dynamic tool for understanding its environmental, social, economic, heritage and cultural layers ensuring its enduring legacy.

This research opens avenues for further investigation into the specific meanings and symbolism associated with different Theyyam performance locations and routes. The passage highlights the importance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as a dynamic expression of identity and community, rather than just physical objects. ICH, like Theyyam in Kerala, faces vulnerability to commodification and urbanization. The author suggests integrating such heritage into development plans, even proposing a specific "cultural development plan" to preserve the spatial dimension and atmosphere of these rituals, ensuring their survival beyond mere tourist spectacles. In essence, it argues for recognizing and protecting the living traditions that truly define a culture, not just its physical artifacts.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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