Living Cultural Heritage *Thira* of Kerala
An Interdisciplinary Exploration

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Abstract

This study examines at the Thira ceremonial art form via an anthropological and museological lens, focusing on its cultural, historical, and performative significance. Thira, religious and social phenomena from Kerala's Malabar area, blends dance, music, and oral traditions. The study follows Thira's growth from tribal and temple origins to modern modifications, capturing broader socio-cultural shifts. It investigates the role of museum anthropology in documenting, preserving, and displaying Thira to ensure the survival of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The research uses qualitative approaches such as ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews to investigate ceremonial symbolism, community participation, and the impact of modernisation on Thira's practice. Thira's semiotics and embodied knowledge are analysed using interdisciplinary approaches such as ethnomusicology, dance anthropology, and performance theory. Given the growing threat to this ceremonial legacy from socio-economic shifts, cultural dilution, and dwindling practitioners, this study emphasises the critical need for rigorous recording and cultural institutional conservation initiatives. The findings emphasise the importance of comprehensive preservation measures, including physical artefacts, visual media, and oral histories, to protect Thira's spiritual and cultural core. Cultural institutions can play an important role in ensuring the continuity of Thira by connecting local traditions with global audiences, fostering cultural sustainability, and preventing the ritual from becoming a mere performance devoid of its original religious and communal significance.

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1.0 Introduction

A living cultural heritage of some communities has enormous anthropological and historical values because it represents the continuity, transformation, and resilience over time. These dynamics guide a community to live in cultural conformity. Unlike static artefacts, the living cultural heritage is the manifestation of a cultural identity, passed down through oral histories, rituals, performances, and social activities. These activities act as social connections, connecting previous generations to the present while adapting to shifting economic, political, and technological landscapes. Anthropologically, living traditions such as Thira, Theyyam, and indigenous storytelling offer crucial insights into belief systems, power dynamics, and collective memory.

The living heritage highlights the role of symbols, performance, and group interaction in shaping human experience. These cultural features are not just representations of cultural identity, but also living archives of indigenous knowledge and collective memory. The role of rituals and symbols in reinforcing community solidarity and development can be appreciated with reference to Victor Turner's seminal work, *The Ritual Process* (1969). He investigated the Ndembu ceremonies in Zambia, demonstrating how symbolic activities during rites of passage create a common liminal area in which social roles are reinterpreted and collective values are reinforced. Studying such traditions helps to preserve intangible heritage by preserving the nuanced ways in which societies make sense of the changing world. Recognising and appreciating these cultural forms are critical engagement on ways of preserving cultural varieties and empowering indigenous voices in an increasingly globalised world (Turner 1969).

One of the central aspects of the living cultural heritage is performing arts. They have long been a subject of anthropological research because they offer valuable insights into cultural identity, social dynamics, and symbolic communication. Anthropologists look at performance via a variety of theoretical lenses, including Victor Turner's (1982) idea of liminality, which investigates how ritual performances generate transitory zones in which individuals and societies reinvent their identities. Richard Schechner's (1985) performance theory broadens this perspective by considering rituals and theatre as interrelated cultural representations that influence human behaviour. Milton Singer (1972) coined the term "cultural performance," emphasising how storytelling, music, and dance may be used to impart cultural information. Scholars chronicle and preserve these developing traditions by combining ethnographic methodologies with museum anthropology, assuring continuity while honouring their spiritual and cultural significance (Dorson 1972). In the context of Thira, these ideas help to explain how ceremonial art serves as both a religious activity and a form of social cohesiveness, combining myth, history, and community involvement.

Performing arts related to faith beliefs when considered from the perspective of museum anthropology is not just for a demonstration of past experiences and events; it is also a way to express the feelings, emotions, and commitments between the deity (either male or female) and the community. Thira: a temple-oriented ritualistic art form is a perfect example of performing arts and a living cultural heritage in Kerala.

Thira performance is one of the ritualistic arts that evolved in the Northern part (Malabar) of Kerala in India around the Wayanad district. It is associated with *Ulsavam*—the annual harvest festival-which is performed during *Magaram* to *Meenam* (corresponding the period from January to March). The occasion is full of bustle; and people from different parts of the state gather in the temple courtyard. The annual harvest festival of Wayanad district

commences at *Poothady* temple and concludes at *Purakkady* temple. The performance of *Thira* is not only a space of cultural reproduction, rather than it is also a centre for socio-cultural unification. This traditional ritualistic art form is performed in a temple or grove. Each *Thira* art form (the performer is also known as *Thira*) has a unique appearance related to the nature and responsibilities of the gods or goddesses. It involves dance, drama, music, and storytelling. *Thira* flourished in ancient times when the joint family (*Tharavadu*) was predominant. Most of the *Tharavadu* had their own groove (*Kavu*) near the courtyards, which later was performed near temples built for the purpose with economic (offerings) from devotees.

Notably, Thira has changed over the years in its content and structure. It covers the area of many disciplines like folkloristic, history, religion, social relations, dance, etc. An anthropological or a museumology approach alone is not sufficient to capture the Thira in its entirety over time. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach is adopted and also suggested for the study of Thira to understand its preservation through change and continuity. Besides, as social dynamics, mind of people, and economic factors keep changing the documentation of contemporary art form needs documentation of all its aspects.

In this backdrop, the paper is designed to study the dynamics of Thira and understand the role of interdisciplinary approach. The study is primarily based on field study conducted in 2024 with reference to previous works where necessary.

2.0 Review of Literature

A review of the literature on performing arts indicates a strong theoretical background based on symbolic interactionism, performance theory, and anthropological studies of ritual and tradition. Scholars such as Victor Turner (1969) have investigated the liminal and communitas components of performance, emphasising how ritual and symbolic performances serve both expressive and integrative purposes in communities. Richard Schechner (2002) elaborates on this by understanding performance as both restored behaviour and a space for negotiating identity, culture, and social structure. Studies on traditional Indian performing arts have highlighted cultural and functional dimensions of ritual performance. Thira, a ritual art form related with Bhagavathi cult worship in Kerala, has been the focus of anthropological and interpretive research. Scholars such as K.K.N. Kurup (1994) and P.J. Cherian (1999) have studied *Thira* within the larger context of Kerala's temple arts, identifying its function in negotiating caste, gender, and religious identities. According to Cherian, the research has concentrated on the performer's embodied experience, the alteration of sacred space, and the community's participatory participation, establishing Thira as both a religious offering and a socio-political manifestation.

The paper presents a review of selected works on museum approach which is employed in the study along with other approaches. Scholars such as Sturtevant (1969) examine the historical relationship between anthropology and museums, while Schorch (2023) emphasises museums' evolving role in critically dealing with colonial histories and ethnographic knowledge. Dahl and Stade (2000) suggest that museum collections function as emblems of ethnic identity; Acord and DeNora (2008) emphasise how artistic forms could be used to preserve cultural values. Studies by Ashley (1992) and Grau (1993) on ritual and performance theory help understand Thira as a ritualistic art form thereby reflecting larger societal narratives. Furthermore, perspectives from ethnomusicology, dance anthropology, and material culture studies emphasise the importance of comprehensive documentation in museums. By drawing on these varied sources, the study lays a solid platform for

investigating how Thira's ceremonial performance might be kept, interpreted, and shown in museum cultural institutional settings

3.0 Study Area

The study was carried out in Wayanad, one of the 14 districts of Kerala in India. The region comes under the northern part of Kerala, popularly known as *Malabar*. Wayanad is nestled on the Western Ghats and southern tip of the Deccan Plateau under the Nilgiris Biosphere. It is mostly a tribal populated district of the state consisting of *Kattunayakka, Paniya, Adiya, Kurichya, Kuruma* and some other communities. Some of the tribes practise a ritual to call the ancestor to possess someone during special occasions. This ritualistic art doesn't have a specific name. This art form is not confined to tribes only. *Chetti,* a land owning non-tribal community of the district, also promotes *Thira*. Due to cultural interaction between *Chetti* and tribes, inter-exchange of values and traditions (acculturation) has taken place. No doubt, the *Chetti* community has borrowed *Thira* tradition from the tribes. *Chetti* community conceptually re-framed the art form to invoke their ancestors; God *Muthappan* who is regarded as *Kulapoorvikan* (the clan ancestor) and deities such as *Melethalachil, Guligan, Bhagavathy*, etc. As Thira is present in all these communities inhabiting Wayanad district, it has been selected as the study area.

The study is undertaken primarily to analyse contemporary importance of documentation and preservation of Thira within museum anthropology framework. The study aims to investigate how musicological approaches can aid to the systematic gathering and interpretation of data, and preservation of both tangible and intangible heritage. The study uses multi-perspective analysis to investigate the regional peculiarity of Thira, focusing on its cultural uniqueness and the changing role of museums in conserving performative traditions.

4.0   Methodology

This study used a qualitative research method with a purposive sampling strategy to identify 20 respondents who were actively involved in the performance of Thira. Given the ethnographic character of the data, this sample size was regarded sufficient to provide important insights that can be generalised to a broader cultural context. Evidently, the study employs interdisciplinary approach with museumology at the core.

A qualitative research study was carried out in Wayanad district, Kerala, using descriptive and interpretative approaches. To investigate the socio-cultural components of Thira ceremonial art, the researchers prioritised field contacts, visual documentation, and narrative analysis over quantitative methodologies. Interdisciplinary approaches have been used to capturing different angles of performing *Thira* art forms, which revitalize the cultural richness. Anthropological perspectives are useful in providing cultural and historical context on how the *Thira* art forms developed and their significance in society to maintain the socio-economic and cultural practices. This context helps capture intangible aspects beyond the artefacts rather than just the visual elements. Inter-disciplinary approach combining musicology, dance theory, costume design, etc. has wider scope of analysis of technical and artistic elements in depth. This ensures aspects like rhythms, movements, and embroidery techniques are documented thoroughly. Working directly with communities keeps the art forms alive versus just studying as outsiders. Multidisciplinary lenses facilitate recording and archiving the *Thira* ritualistic art in various formats - written descriptions, audio/video recordings, photographs, drawings, etc. This ensures comprehensive documentation for future generations.

The major data collection strategy was *observation*—both participant and non-participant which allowed researchers to document individual behaviours, social interactions, and environmental circumstances in their natural settings for the study's rigour and validity. Tools and techniques used for collecting qualitative data included semi-structured interviews, comparison analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork. Structured interview techniques ensured systematic data gathering and consistency among respondents. Secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed journals, books, archive materials, and movies, were also examined to give contextual depth, theoretical foundation, and identify existing research gaps in the fields of museum anthropology and ritual performance studies.

5.0 Thira or Thirayattam: A Detailed Description

In olden days, the ritualistic art form was performed in a simple form, and people could perform without any pre-arrangements. Physical purity was the only norm. The performer has to forego non-vegetarian food for few days before the occasion. In the olden days, *Thira* was performed multiple times in a year when the elder person of the *Tharavadu* or the temple priest gets a revelation from the deity. People believe that the performer gets possessed by the deity and from the *Thira* they can get a sudden remedy or solution to their problems. Each of the *Thira* performers gets extraordinary power and loses external consciousness when the deity possesses him (for the Thira is invariable a male. Later, the role of *Thira* was lost because of the disintegration of the joint family system due to migration and separation. This emerging phenomena added visible changes into the ritualistic art, shifting the occasion into an annual celebration. Eventually, the ritualistic art form adopted a variety of recently developed concepts and ideologies that made the art form more vibrant and attractive. Simultaneously, the real essence of the art form got diluted. However, the rituals conducted before, during, and after *Thira* are more or less static. *Thira* can be considered the backbone rather than an art form for maintaining the functional structure of the temple and surrounding villages. During field work, a Thira performer from the Malayan community said that 'according to people's beliefs, *"Thira"* uses spiritual methods or supernatural connections to address societal problems. Thus, this ceremonial approach is a powerful means of influencing the public.

The Malayan performers assume that *Thira* is a variant of *Theyyam* and embodies some variations in its conceptual framework. In *Theyyam,* the performer acts as the representative of the deity. But in *Thira*, the performer is possessed by the deity. Generally, *Veshapradhanam* (costume) is more crucial for *Theyyam,* and *Attapradhanam* (movement*)* is the central attraction for *Thira*. Compared with *Theyyam*, the *Thira* art form has numerous rituals and customs. Even the dissimilarities are visible in the ceremonial facial paintings, *Theyyam* has thin lines on the face and *Thira* has thick lines. Some of them assume that these ritualistic art forms such as *Thira* and *Theyyam,* are similar but popular in different names in different regions—*Theyyam* in the Kannur and Kasaragod districts and *Thira* in Wayanad, Kozhikode, and Malappuram districts.

The major *Thira* art forms centred-around temples include *Bhagavathi Thira, Murikkanmar Thira, Guligan Thira, Muthappan Thira, Poothady Daivam Thira, Melethalachil Thira, Kettukaran Thira, Porkalimathavu,* and *Kuttichathan Thira*. Each of the art forms contains its own unique appearances and costumes that are again sub-categorized for gods and goddesses. In an interview Thira performers shared that 'red colour is more dominant in costumes and facial paints over others. It symbolically represents the ferocious appearance and rhythmic movements elevate the ethical and aesthetic values of tradition'.

5.1 Genesis and Development

Thira is an ancient ritualistic art form that originated among the tribal communities   in the Malabar region of Kerala, India. Because of its oral transmission, determining a specific period and geographical origin remains difficult. Traditionally, Thira was a spirit possession ritual in which a designated individual of social or spiritual significance served as a conduit for ancestral or divine communication, allowing community problem-solving and direction. It originated as a ritual practice among tribal communities as a way to connect with ancestors for guidance and help. Over time, non-tribal cultures adopted and reinterpreted Thira, moving its performance from tribal settings to temple courtyards, resulting in changes in structure, ritual practices, and presentation. Despite these changes and regional variances, the fundamental conceptual framework of calling deities and ancestor spirits through performance has remained almost unchanged.

Figure 1: The Thira embodying Goddess Bhagavathi (believed to be an incarnation of deity *Kali*). (Photo: First Author)

During the early stages of Thira, the Kalanadi   was the major performer of the rite in several areas with temple patronage in Wayanad district. Particularly, the Kalanadi is a non-tribal community settled in Kalanadiukolly, Kalluvayal, and Kelakkavala regions. However, the similarity of appearance and attire made the performances less visually appealing to the audience and thus unattractive. This led to reduce the temple's prosperity and subsequently temple patronage. Following astrological consultations, temple officials delegated performance duties to the Malayan community, known locally as Kettiyattakar, famous for their extravagant facial paints and bright costumes. This transformation resulted in the addition of new performative aspects and aesthetic upgrades, which improved the ritual's visual appeal and public recognition. Currently, the Peruvannan and Malayan communities are the principal Thira performers in northern Kerala, with the Malayadiyan subset of the Malayan community playing in Wayanad. According to oral traditions, as reported by a Peruvannan performer, his ancestors were chosen for Thira after one of them unearthed an arrow belonging to the deity Muthappan when he went fishing on a river bank. The God appeared and gave a boon,   '*You are the first person who saw my arrow, therefore you have to perform my Thira*'. Thira performances are inextricably linked with mythology and socio-cultural themes. For example, Bhagavathi Thira, performed in Bhagavathi temples, tells the arrival story of Goddess Kali (Kodungalloor Amma) from southern Kerala to Malabar. According to popular narrative prevalent in Chetti community of the Pulpally region, members who had traditionally participated in temple ceremonies, encountered difficulties in travelling to Kodungalloor. So, they summoned and enshrined the deity at Pongini. However, conflicts caused the goddess' neglect and migration to Pulpally, which, according to oral tales, caused divine vengeance affecting their well-being adversely. Following astrological consultations, they re-established Kali worship in Pulpally, a story that is still told by Bhagavathi Thira. Similarly, in the Chetti Tharavadu, Goddess Sita (of The Ramayana) is the cult goddess. During temple festivals, the *Velichappadu* (oracle), under divine possession, recounts mythological tales linking Sita to the Chetti lineage, strengthening the ritual's cultural and ancestral significance.

Thira performance progresses in three main stages, mirroring the human life cycle. The stages are *Vellattu, Vellakettu,* and *Thira*. *Balyam* (childhood)and *Kaumaram* are sub-

stages of *Vellattu*. The other two stages represent *Yauvanam* (adulthood) and *Vardhakyam* (old age).   The performance begins with *Balyam*, in which the performer obtains divine grace prior to possession. This is followed by the phase of *Kaumaram* (adolescence). In some areas, performances may skip straight from *Vellattu* to *Thira*. During possession, the performer is believed to obtain greater spiritual energy and embody the deity (see Picture 1) throughout the rite.

5.2 Appearance of Thira

The *Thira* art forms are the representations of various local deities worshipped in temples and sacred groves. Each of the *Thira* has specific appearance based on his look and depictions. Evidently, there are several *Thira* art forms performed in the temples and grooves of the Wayanad district.   Normally, a *Thira* is depicted in three forms: (1) *Roudram* (ferocious), (2) *Saumyam* (gentle), and   (3) *Hasyam* (humour). Roudram form has an angry and fierce look to instil a sense of awe and fear. Examples include *Karivilli*, *Kandhakarnan*, *Veerabhadran*, *Badrakali*, *Karingali*, *Raktheswari*, *Raktha Chamundi,* and *Bhagavathi Thira*. Saumyam Thira is calm and peaceful appearance. Examples include *Bhuvaneswari* and *Odakali*. The last form of Thira depicts humorous or comic representations.

5.3 Artefacts and associated beliefs

Figure 2: Ferocious look of Bhagavati Thira who is blessing devotees with holy water. (Photo: First Author)

The artifacts of *Thira* are made up of locally available materials, reflecting how nature influences a region's culture and tradition. The costumes (*Chamayakop*) of the *Thira* are a combination of different varieties. These are worn in following systematic order that holds the artefacts tightly. Behind every artefact is its own *mantra* that is spelled before wearing it. Mantras are very precious and secret, which are not revealed to the people.   Each of the objects is made up of lightweight wood such as coral trees, bamboo, banana stems, green coconut fronds, and *mathagapoli* (*Calotropis Gigantea*). The performer completes *Mughamezhuthu* before wearing the objects. *Mughamezhuthu* is the name of the ceremonial facial painting done by the performer as part of the ritualistic preparations. Four colours are predominant in *Mughamezhuthu* such as *white* which extracted from rice flour, *red* which is the mixture of turmeric and calcium hydroxide, *black* which is extracted from charcoal, and *yellow* which is extracted from turmeric or specific clay. Use of colour is based on the nature and appearance of God and Goddesses Red colour mainly is used for *Bhagavathi Thira* to get the ferocious appearance (picture-2).

Before the *Mughamezhuthu* ceremony, the performer offers *Dakshina,* offerings such as betel leaves, areca nuts, and a single coin to the elder members of the community to get their blessings.

Objects worn by a Thira are the following:

Kacchha: The first artefact that is worn by the performer; it is tied to the calf after *Mughamezhuthu*. It symbolises the beginning of traditional agricultural activities in the villages.

Thalappali*:* It is fixed above the forehead. *Thalappali* consists of 21 pieces locally called *Karu*. Each of the pieces represents 21 *gurus* like *Egaswaroopam*, *Sivasakthi*, *Moorthy*, *Veda*, etc.

Thanda: It is tied in between the *Thalappali* and Crown; it supports and fills the gap between these two objects.

Ola and **Thoda**: These are used for Goddesses *Thira, i.*e. the female Thira. *Thoda* is a kind of earring which was used traditionally by the elderly women of tribal and *Chetti* communities in the Malabar region.

Ezhunira: It consists of seven layers and is used to cover the chest part of female Thira. It symbolises *Thali* (an auspicious thread) and *Mala* (necklace).

Koralaram*:* It covers the chest and belly parts of male Thira' it is decorated with vibrant colours.

Mughasobha: It is used for *Kuttichathan Thira,* it represents the ears of a bull.

Chilambu: It is mainly used for *Bhagavathi* and *Rakthachamundi Thira. Chilambu* is a heavy ornament made up of bronze which is worn on the ankle.

Egar: It consists of a pair of teeth similar to the canine made up of silver or bronze, it is fixed on both sides of the mouth.

Apart from these objects, there are plenty of *abharanam* (jewels) used by the art forms that are different for gods and goddess. Jewels are made up of natural materials like peacock feathers, leaves, insects, wood, metals, and vibrant cloths. Varieties of abharanam are called *Meyyabharanam*, *Kayyabharanam*, *Thalayabhranam, Arayabharanam*, and *Udutham*. Weapons are another essential object needed for performing *Thira.* According to Hindu epics and legends, Gods and Goddesses have their unique weapons such as *vaal* (swords), *ambu* and *villu* (bow and arrow), etc. They symbolise destruction of evils. Some *Thira* art form has crutches, especially for *Muthappan Thira. Muthappan* is one of the ancestors. It symbolises the old age in a particular culture.

5.4Music and Rhythm: an ethnomusicological view

This study looks at how performing arts encode cultural rhythms and movements, providing more insight into their societal value. These performances vary over time as a result of cultural interchange and interaction, expressing the dynamism of heritage and tradition. Thira's rhythms and choreography are based on everyday routines and occupational customs, particularly those of agricultural communities like the Adiya, Paniya (agricultural labourers), and Chetti (land owners). Their movements involved in paddy cultivation are intertwined uniquely with Thira art form; these have been stylised and altered for performance purposes. Thira's interplay of rhythm and movement is complemented by traditional musical instruments made of wood and metal, which create distinct auditory atmospheres based on modulation and tempo (picture 3). The instruments like Chenda (*Cylindrical percussion*

instrument) and Elathalam (*a small bronze metallic musical instrument*) in particular, create an impressive auditory environment by directing the performer's movements and deity representation. As stated by the Thira performer from the Malayan community of the Puthady region in the district, the interconnection of movement and sound not only adds to the ritual's visual appeal, but also strengthens its cultural authenticity and spiritual value.

5.5 *Arrival of Thira from Animara to Arang: Transition from human to God*

Figure 3: Thira performing with the beat of drum. (Picture: First Author)

The Animara (Aniyara) is a temporary off-stage structure set up in the temple courtyard one day before the festival to serve as a preparation area for the performer who represents the deity. During the shift, attendants sing Thottam Pattu, devotional songs/hymns with mantras and mythological themes, to the rhythmic beats of Chendamelam. This auditory and ritualistic atmosphere helps the performer undergo psychological and spiritual transformation to the divinity. Each deity has own Thottam Pattu, which strengthens its symbolic identity. As the final preparations are completed, a priest unveils a mirror, allowing the performer to see his divine incarnation. After finishing Thottam, the performer emerges from *Animara* into *Arang* (onstage), the temple courtyard, decked out in magnificent clothes and ornaments, and begins the sacred Thira dance in time with the music.

6.0 Role of Inter-disciplinary Partnership on Performing Thira

The pre-arrangements of performing *Thira* start a week before the event, which indicates more precise planning and preparation needed for performing the ritualistic art. People create a pleasant atmosphere around the temple by decorating with different types and shapes of woven green coconut fronds. It helps set the scene and mood. The objects are systematically set up, showing an organised arrangement and placement of props/equipment. The ritual begins with a wooden chair placed in the middle of the temple courtyard. It is an important part of the ritual before performance begins. The priest evokes the god to this chair before the *Thira* performance, and this sitting ritual or *Peedhasangalppam* is an essential ritual during Thira performance (picture-4). *Thira* is performed around the temple in open space. Needless to say, the courtyard of the temple is changed to a performance space. Costume settings and ceremonial facial paintings are done in *Aniyara* or *Animara*, which, as is described, is an offstage place in a corner of the temple courtyard.

6.1 *Need for preserving such Intangible Cultural Heritage through Documentation*

Rituals and traditions change over time, which disintegrates past cultural values, norms, and associated art forms. Incidence of migration for jobs to other parts of the world disconnected cultural bond between individuals. This affected the socio-cultural bond between individuals. Apart from this motion, losing interest diluted the real essence of the ritualistic art form. Documentation, museum collection, and exhibition of tangible artefacts of these ritualistic art forms are essential for the preservation of such living art forms.

Figure 4: *Peedhasangalppam.*
(Photo: First Author)

Cultural traditions are deteriorating, which poses a huge threat to belief systems, rituals, and artistic practices. Thira, originally a socio-cultural control mechanism, played an important role in structuring community life. Beyond its actual artefacts, Thira embodies centuries of intangible legacy passed down verbally through ethics, values, and practices. Preserving these non-monetary cultural assets is critical to understanding historical lifestyles and societal changes. Traditionally, Thira was firmly embedded in joint family systems, with each *Tharavad* (ancestral household) maintaining a *Kulakshetram* (family temple) dedicated to a *Kuladevatha* (family deity), who was thought to intervene actively in communal affairs through ritual acts.

Notably, cultural institutions and museums play an important role in preserving Thira's heritage, allowing future generations to access and study this ritualistic tradition even as live performances dwindle. It gives historical context by recording and archiving Thira artefacts, including their origins, symbolism, and history. This not only facilitates comparative analysis with different cultural traditions but also encourages multidisciplinary research in anthropology, ethnomusicology, and performance studies. Furthermore, exhibitions raise awareness, making Thira available to people who might not otherwise see live performances, so maintaining cultural interest and involvement. By moving from temple courtyards to cultural institutional spaces, Thira's ceremonial and artistic value can be preserved through curation, documentation, and scholarly interpretation. Institutions act as cultural bridges, allowing both local and international visitors to experience the art form in a controlled setting.

Furthermore, they contribute to the economic viability of performers, as evidenced by international collaborations in which Thira artists have shown their performances and artefacts in France, Switzerland, and Poland. Thira is both a religious tradition and a source of income for the Malayan community, emphasising the importance of museum-led projects that promote its preservation, representation, and ongoing practice on a global scale.

7.0   Results

Thira ritualistic art is profoundly based in cultural traditions, which are constantly evolving while retaining basic ritualistic aspects. Apart from its tangible artefacts, Thira serves as an oral storehouse of ancestral history, reflecting societal changes over time. However, due to shifting societal patterns and attitudes, some aspects have been altered or lost over centuries. One of the best examples of that is the people's mentality on the art form. The *Melethalachil Thira* was performed during the early morning around 3 AM. As it is performed with fire, it makes the atmosphere more vibrant. This Thira symbolically represents awakening the *Maladaivam* (God of Mountains), but later for convenience, they shifted it to the daytime, and   is viewed just as an art form. This dynamic nature presents issues for museum depiction, since static displays fail to reflect the living spirit. However, contextualised and multidisciplinary documentation can assist museums in accurately preserving and interpreting Thira's developing legacy. Thira also serves as a symbolic and semiotic framework, rebuilding previous cultural meanings through performance. For example, the dominating use of red in costumes and ceremonial facial paintings is symbolic of spiritual and ritualistic value, in addition to aesthetic reasons. Many of these symbolic traditions are at risk of

extinction if active transmission is not maintained. A performer from the Malayan community, for example, voiced fear as he is the final generation to practise this art form due to patrilineal inheritance rules, for he has two daughters in the lineage. Museum anthropology plays an important role in maintaining Thira's intangible legacy by doing anthropological fieldwork, documenting it, and curating exhibitions that represent both its historical depth and contemporary developments. But may not be enough on the face of multidisciplinary dimensions of Thira.

8.0   Concluding remarks

Thira, a ritualistic art form from Kerala, is in decline due to socio-economic changes, modernisation, and the breakdown of joint family units. As a living tradition firmly rooted in mythology, communal identity, and religious practice, its preservation needs immediate interdisciplinary engagement. Traditional museum approaches are not adequate to portray its dynamic nature. An interdisciplinary approach that includes anthropology, ethnomusicology, dance studies, religious study, folkloristic, historiography and material culture research is employed for a comprehensive understanding of tangible living heritage as pre-requisite of preservation. Thira's sustainability is also threatened by a shrinking number of practitioners and shifting cultural environments, necessitating careful documentation and museum curation. Without quick action, Thira risks becoming a disjointed and commercialised performance, losing its ritualistic, spiritualistic and community importance. This study argues that museums and cultural institutions along with other stakeholders must coordinate to formulate a comprehensive plan for implementation that respects Thira's ceremonial setting while making it accessible to global audiences, and assures its survival for future generations.

Note

1. Living cultural heritage refers to practices, traditions, and customs passed down from generation to generation within a community that are still practiced and celebrated today. Theyyam of Kannur district and Thira of Wayanad district are suitable examples of living cultural heritage.

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