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Unfolding Layers of Tradition: *Neelamperoor Padayani* as a Cultural Palimpsest in Central Travancore

Dr. Anu Lakshmi Babu

This paper explores *Neelamperoor Padayani*, a ritual temple art form in the Central Travancore region of Kerala, celebrated for its unique fusion of Dravidian, Buddhist and Hindu influences. Centred in the village of Neelamperoor, the annual *Pooram Padayani* festival showcases the community's collective identity through decorative effigies, devotional songs and performances largely organised by local villagers. This sixteen-day festival, which starts after Thiruvonam in the Malayalam month of Chingam, emphasises communal engagement and environmental connection through offerings such as swan effigies crafted from natural materials. While performed in honour of the deity *Palli Bhagavathi* at present, this *Padayani* retains elements of pre-Vedic fertility rituals tied to agricultural cycles, illustrating the aspect of cultural syncretism in Kerala's traditional art forms. Employing Clifford Geertz's interpretive methodology of Thick Description, this study critically examines the symbols and rituals of *Padayani*, revealing the underlying values and beliefs of the village community. The paper underscores the dynamic interplay between indigenous traditions and organized religions in *Neelamperoor Padayani*.

Keywords: *Neelamperoor Padayani*, Ritual Art, Travancore, Buddhist, Thick Description, Syncretism, Dravidian

Introduction

The Travancore region of Kerala is renowned for its rich cultural heritage. It is home to numerous temple art forms that seamlessly integrate religious, artistic, cultural and ecological elements. Among these, *Neelamperoor Padayani*, a ritual art performed in the village of Neelamperoor located near the Eastern shore of Vembanad Lake in Alappuzha District, stands out as a unique ritual art form. This picturesque village, celebrated for its artistic legacy, is marked by lush green paddy fields, swaying coconut palms and tranquil water bodies. The serene landscape reflects the region's agrarian lifestyle and highlights the deep connection between the people and their environment, emphasizing its natural beauty. The pride of Neelamperoor is *Pooram Padayani*, an annual festival dedicated to the deity *Palli Bhagavathi*, also called Karthayani, an aspect of Vanadurga. This festival has long been a vibrant reflection of the local community's identity, preserving its tradition despite the changing cultural landscape.

Neelamperoor Padayani, also known as *Neelamperoor Pooram*, is a striking example of cultural syncretism, blending Dravidian, Buddhist and Hindu influences, underscoring the pluralistic cultural fabric of Kerala. The festival spans sixteen days, beginning after Thiruvonam in the Malayalam month of Chingam and culminating on Pooram day. It is marked by the creation and display of elaborate effigies, known as *kolams*, crafted from natural materials such as flowers, leaves and plantain sheaths. These effigies, combined with devotional songs and community performances, emphasise the ritualistic, aesthetic and agrarian dimensions of the festival. While celebrated in honour of *Palli Bhagavathi*, the art also retains elements of pre-Vedic fertility rituals, reflecting the agricultural cycles that have historically shaped the region's culture. Central to *Neelamperoor Padayani* is its strong community spirit. Unlike many other temple festivals, which have been commercialized or influenced by priestly intervention, it remains a grassroots event. It is primarily organized and performed by the villagers themselves, who take an active role in crafting the effigies and performing the rituals. This community-driven nature of the festival not only reinforces the deep connection between

the people and their environment but also highlights their spiritual devotion, preserving the tradition and ensuring its continued relevance within the village's cultural heritage.

To understand the deeper meanings embedded within the practices and rituals of *Neelamperoor Padayani*, this paper draws on the interpretive methodology of the post-structuralist anthropologist Clifford Geertz, particularly his concept of Thick Description. Geertz's approach allows for a nuanced analysis of cultural symbols, suggesting that rituals and symbols are not merely decorative, but serve as vehicles for conveying shared meanings and values within a society. As Geertz argues, "culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms" (1973, p. 89) and these symbols are essential in understanding the cultural worldview of a community. Geertz's Thick Description emphasizes that meaning is best understood when analysed within the specific social practices that shape it (Geertz, 1973, p. 9). By applying this framework, the paper explores how the different aspects of this *Padayani*—such as the effigies, rituals, narratives and performances—reflect the collective identity, religious beliefs and worldview of the village community.

In addition to Geertz's perspective, this study also incorporates Homi K. Bhabha's theory of Cultural Hybridity, particularly his notion of 'third spaces', to examine how *Neelamperoor Padayani* embodies the dynamic convergence of diverse cultural influences. According to Bhabha, cultural identity is not a fixed or inherent trait; rather, it is a dynamic and evolving process shaped by the fusion of diverse cultural influences, leading to the emergence of new, hybrid expressions that challenge traditional notions of cultural purity or essence. He suggests that "it is in the emergence of [such] interstices that the intersubjective exchange and collective experience" of communities and their cultural identity are negotiated (1994, p. 2), emphasizing how these hybrid spaces foster a fluid and negotiated sense of belonging. This ritual art is not merely a fusion of Dravidian, Buddhist and Hindu traditions but a transformative site where these various cultural elements interact, creating new meanings and identities. The active involvement of the community in shaping the rituals fosters a sense of belonging and

reinforces the resilience of ritual practices amidst the changing cultural environment.

Clifford Geertz's methodology for studying culture, religion and rituals emphasizes the importance of interpreting cultural practices through their symbolic layers of meaning. In his methodology of Thick Description, Geertz (1973) argues that rituals and symbols should be analysed as texts, where each element carries complex meanings that reflect a community's worldview. It posits that cultural practices cannot be understood superficially; they require a deep engagement with their social and contextual dynamics. Geertz's ideas are linked to the concepts of cultural hybridity and syncretism, which examine how diverse cultural elements merge to create new identities and practices. His work highlights the adaptability of cultural symbols and rituals, shaped by historical and social contexts, and demonstrates how different traditions interact and evolve within a community.

Sthalapurana: History, Culture and Narratives

The village of Neelamperoor has a complex and layered religious history that reflects the shifting cultural and spiritual dynamics of Kerala over many centuries. The name 'Neelamperoor' itself is derived from 'Neelakanta', an epithet for Shiva, highlighting the area's original connection to the deity. However, the temple in Neelamperoor has undergone significant transformations throughout its history, evolving from a Buddhist site to a Shiva shrine, and eventually, to its present-day dedication to *Palli Bhagavathi*, while retaining elements that trace back to its earlier Buddhist roots.

Choottu Padayani, performed during the first four days here, reflects ancient practices of invoking spirits and paying homage to the land for a bountiful harvest. In this ritual, bundles of dry coconut leaves or *choottu*, are set on fire to consecrate the space. Performers move around the area with the burning *choottu*, continuing the tradition as part of the larger *Padayani* performance dedicated to the deity. While the focus has shifted to honouring and appeasing the deity, the ritual retains the symbolic meanings of earlier practices, particularly the invocation of spirits and natural forces tied to fertility and prosperity, linking it to ancient nature worship traditions. The ashes scattered

after the *choottu* burns symbolize renewal, the cyclical nature of life and the community's spiritual connection to the land. This practice reflects ancient customs where fire, ash and natural forces aligned the community with the land's fertility. The distinctive 'ooi' sounds during the performance evoke ancient Dravidian expressions, reinforcing the connection to early tribal customs and nature worship. *Choottu Padayani* not only emphasizes the agrarian roots of the community but also demonstrates how ancient rituals persist and adapt to contemporary organised religious practices.

Neelamperoor's religious history dates back to a time when the region was home to Buddhist monastic centres, which is reflected in the presence of the idol of *Palli Bhagavathi* leaning on a tree branch, resembling Maya Devi, the mother of the Buddha. This indicates the temple's early association with Buddhism. The motif of the swan, a symbol of purity and spiritual ascent in Buddhist iconography, further underscores the area's Buddhist influence in its formative stages. This suggests that the temple was initially a Buddhist centre before transitioning to Hindu practices. By the 9th century, during the reign of Cheraman Perumal, Kerala experienced a religious shift as Buddhism began to decline and Hinduism gained prominence, largely due to the influence of Adi Shankara, whose advocacy of *Advaita Vedanta* and efforts to revive temple worship played a crucial role in strengthening Hinduism's position in the region. Over time, the temple in Neelamperoor became a Shiva shrine, aligning with the broader trend of Hindu religious expansion. Traces of its Buddhist past, however, remained visible. For example, the presence of a Vishnu shrine within the temple, featuring an idol in a yogic pose reminiscent of the Buddha, symbolises the syncretism of Hindu and Buddhist elements. This blend of traditions remained part of the temple's identity for centuries.

Neelamperoor temple is believed to have served as a Shiva shrine for a long period, but its history took a dramatic turn during the late 18th century during Tipu Sultan's military expeditions in Kerala. The Brahmin priests of Neelamperoor, fearing desecration by Tipu's forces, fled with the Shiva idol for safekeeping, marking a significant shift in the temple's practices. Later, the temple's religious focus

shifted towards the worship of *Bhagavathi*. Today, the temple is dedicated to *Palli Bhagavathi*, still retaining elements from its earlier history.

In addition to its religious and historical dimensions, this art reflects an ecological consciousness that is deeply ingrained in Kerala's ritual traditions. The festival's use of natural materials—leaves, charcoal, plantain sheath, flowers and organic colours derived from flowers—suggests an intimate connection between this art and the land. This focus on sustainability challenges the modern reliance on synthetic materials in performance traditions and critiques the commercialization of ritual art forms. In an era where environmental concerns are paramount, this art serves as a reminder of the ecological wisdom embedded in indigenous cultural practices, offering a model of sustainable celebration that stands in stark contrast to the destructive tendencies of modern industrialization.

Art and Performance: Forging a Collective Identity

Neelamperoor Padayani is a vibrant expression of mythology, faith and community participation. Central to the festival are its effigies, particularly the swan and elephant figures, which symbolize profound spiritual and cultural values. The swan effigy, symbolizing purity, spiritual awakening and transcendence in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, can be interpreted as the soul's journey toward ultimate liberation. These effigies are not merely artistic expressions but serve as powerful symbols of collective identity, uniting mythology, craftsmanship and devotion. The judicious use of natural materials and intricate designs reflect the continuity of indigenous traditions in modern times.

The performative aspects of *Padayani*, including *Thullal* (rhythmic dancing) and *Thozheekkal* (acts of homage), highlight its deeply embodied nature. These ritual movements act as a medium for participants to channel devotion, shifting between physical performance and spiritual offering. The active involvement of the community in these performances emphasises *Padayani*'s collective meaning, fostering both introspection and communal bonding. The repeated swaying of effigies in *Padayani* may be interpreted in the

light of the Buddhist concept of *samsara*, the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The rhythmic motion reflects life's impermanence and flux, while its connection to karma underscores the influence of actions on future outcomes. Representing efforts to transcend suffering caused by attachment and ignorance, the ritual invokes spiritual awakening and renewal, blending cosmic balance with collective devotion. These aspects of this art form, rooted in multiple traditions, reaffirm the festival's role as a communal event where individual and collective identities merge. Neelamperoor Padayani can be read as a "third space" where distinct cultural traditions intersect to create new meanings. Bhabha's concept emphasizes how cultural intermingling produces hybrid forms that transcend their original identities, resulting in syncretic cultural expressions. In this art, this hybridity is evident in the convergence of folk Oral traditions with Buddhist and Hindu traditions. The festival integrates ancient Dravidian agricultural themes and Buddhist life-cycle concepts into a contemporary Hindu framework, showcasing the adaptability of local traditions. It stands as a dynamic cultural space where traditions intermingle, producing innovative forms and meanings that continue to resonate with the community today.

Narratives in Flux: A Thick Description of Effigies

Clifford Geertz's framework of Thick Description offers an insightful methodology for analysing *Neelamperoor Padayani*, particularly the narrative rooted in Bheema's quest for the *Kalyanasaugandhikam* flower from the *Mahabharata*'s "Vana Parva". Geertz argues that cultural practices must be interpreted within their socio-cultural and religious contexts, viewing them as texts rich with layered meanings. A Thick Description of a cultural text delves deeper than surface-level observations, aiming to uncover the multiple layers of meaning within a social act, ritual or practice. When analysing a ritual, for instance, it involves not just observing the outward actions, but also exploring the beliefs, historical significance and social dynamics that shape the ritual. This comprehensive approach reveals how cultures mediate with each other and how a ritual is shaped by individual and collective identities, social hierarchies, power structures and various contextual elements.

In this context, Bheema's journey transcends the role of a mere heroic tale, evolving into a complex narrative of personal sacrifice, devotion and the intricate relationship between humanity and the natural world. The *Mahabharata* provides not only a glimpse into Bheema's character but also underscores the significance of cultural symbols tied to the epic's spiritual and mythological dimensions.

Draupadi's desire for the *Kalyanasaugandhikam* flower, known for its divine fragrance, sets the stage for Bheema's journey to Alakapuri, the enchanted *Yaksha* Garden. Bheema's decision to embark on this quest exemplifies themes of love, devotion and sacrifice, reinforcing the interconnection between personal desires and broader collective narratives. His immense physical strength, matched by his emotional depth and commitment to Draupadi's wish, reflects the *Mahabharata*'s emphasis on duty and selflessness. Viewed through Geertz's lens, the episode reflects how cultural symbols encapsulate complex meanings that are central to both personal identity and collective cultural expression.

The journey through the wilderness is more than a physical traversal of space; it symbolises the inner journey of transformation. The lush landscapes, vibrant flora, sacred waters and encounters with divine creatures reflect the richness of Bheema's internal battle, thus blending the natural with the divine. His encounter with a wild monkey—later revealed to be Hanuman—adds further layers of meaning to the narrative. Hanuman's challenge to Bheema and Bheema's failure to leap over him symbolises the basic theme of humility in the *Mahabharata*. Geertz's assertion that cultural symbols carry layered meanings becomes evident here; Bheema's moment of failure signals an awareness of one's limitations and the recognition that strength must be tempered by humility. This pivotal interaction not only shapes Bheema's character but also reinforces the *Mahabharata*'s spiritual lessons on the balance between physical power and inner wisdom.

The effigies created further manifest the symbolic power of the cultural narrative. Representing Bheema's encounters—whether with Hanuman, the wilderness, or the divine—the effigies act as

cultural symbols that perpetuate the enduring themes of the *Mahabharata*. They are not merely artistic representations; they serve as cultural artefacts that connect the audience with the timeless wisdom of the epic. The collaborative effort required to create these effigies reflects the communal aspect of mythological storytelling, strengthening the shared identity of the community. Through this communal process, the symbolic representations of Bheema, Hanuman and other figures embody core values of duty, humility, and reverence for nature—values that remain deeply ingrained in the region’s cultural and spiritual fabric. Thus, the effigies in *Neelamperoor Padayani* do more than honour mythological figures; they serve as living symbols that bridge the past and present, linking contemporary spiritual practice with ancient cultural expressions. The ritual act of crafting and swaying these effigies becomes an act of collective remembrance and spiritual renewal, reinforcing the continuity of these cultural narratives. Beyond celebrating the grandeur of myth, the effigies offer a profound reflection on human limitation, devotion, and the crucial role nature plays in shaping human existence. They provide not only a space for communal reflection but also an opportunity for individual spiritual growth, emphasizing the timeless relevance of these mythological themes in everyday life. Clifford Geertz argues that culture comprises a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols” (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). He asserts that these symbols serve as a medium through which individuals communicate their understanding of life and their attitudes toward it. Geertz emphasizes the importance of unpacking concepts like “‘meaning’, ‘symbol’ and ‘conception’” (Geertz, 1973, p. 89) which are essential for a nuanced understanding of culture, particularly in anthropology’s study of religion. This perspective is relevant to the *Neelamperoor Padayani* festival, where the rituals and symbols used not only reflect the community’s spiritual beliefs but also encapsulate its historical and cultural identity. As Geertz states, there is “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). *Neelamperoor Padayani* is a vehicle for expressing and preserving the cultural heritage of the Neelamperoor community,

making it a vivid illustration of the interplay between tradition and contemporary identity.

The effigy of *Nagayakshi*, the serpent queen, in Neelamperoor Padayani, serves as a compelling representation of Dravidian cultural roots, embodying themes of life, fertility, and prosperity traditionally associated with serpent deities in indigenous worship. Crafted with coconut fronds and taro leaves, and adorned with banana stem bangles, *Nagayakshi* symbolizes the sacredness of nature's bounty and the fertility of the earth. *Yakshis*—female spirits associated with fertility and abundance—were revered in Dravidian culture for their embodiment of vitality and nourishment. The later interpretations in Aryan mythologies often recast them as seductresses, reflecting a shift in cultural narratives. Yet, in the context of this ritual art, *Nagayakshi* is a potent protector and benefactor, with villagers singing hymns to invoke her blessings for the prosperity of their community. This continuity reflects the syncretic nature of Kerala's spiritual landscape, merging native and pan-Indian beliefs while highlighting the significance of cultural symbols in conveying communal values. The rich symbolism embedded in the *Padayani* festival reflects the broader cultural context in which these narratives operate. These effigies not only celebrate the beauty of the natural world but also encapsulate ethical lessons that transcend time and space.

The effigy of Ravana, the legendary character from the *Ramayana*, underscores the fluidity and adaptability of *Padayani* to incorporate diverse mythological elements. Although his narrative does not directly align with the narrative of Bhima's quest for the flower, Ravana's inclusion illustrates the festival's openness to various narrative threads, effectively blending Hindu mythology with local storytelling traditions. While Ravana is traditionally considered the antagonist of the epic, he is celebrated and honoured in *Neelamperoor Padayani*. This distinctive representation underscores the festival's embrace of cultural complexity and the flexibility of ritual art forms, which draws from the region's cross-cultural encounters—including Dravidian, Buddhist and Hindu mythologies—thus creating a multi-dimensional narrative experience. This adaptability resonates with Geertz's idea

that the meanings of cultural practices are layered and intertwined, reflecting a community's historical and social fabric.

Constructed from jute, hay and other locally sourced materials, the elephant effigy named Neelakantan not only serves as a physical representation of power but also embodies divine authority, drawing from both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. The use of these natural, locally available materials connects the effigy directly to the land and the community's resources, underscoring a deep reverence for the environment. Across various cultures, including Dravidian and broader South Asian contexts, the elephant is a prominent figure in myths, folklore and storytelling, symbolizing strength, wisdom and sacredness. In Dravidian culture, the elephant is revered for its power and intellect. During the festival, the Goddess' idol is ceremonially placed upon the effigy, which gracefully glides across the festival grounds, accompanied by the resonant sounds of *nadaswaram*, the traditional South Indian wind instrument. This procession encapsulates the syncretism inherent in Kerala's cultural expressions, highlighting the intersection of folk traditions that respect natural elements and the reverence for elephants within Hindu-Buddhist iconography. Geertz posits that religious and ritualistic symbols provide insight into the collective psyche of a community, offering a framework through which to understand the interplay between tradition, social identity and the natural world.

Simham or the Lion effigy, representing the Goddess's vehicle, embodies strength, protection and resilience. Painted in bold colours, this lion effigy projects a fierce yet protective presence, paralleling the Goddess's role as a guardian deity. The symbolism of lions is pervasive in both Hindu and Buddhist iconography, where they are associated with ultimate strength and the divine capability to safeguard against malevolent forces. Here, it reinforces the authority of the deity, echoing the themes of divine sovereignty and protective power that are central to both religious traditions. This interplay of symbols not only enhances the festival's narrative depth but also serves as a reflection of the cultural values that underpin the community's spiritual practices.

The effigies function as powerful cultural symbols that encapsulate the complex interplay between Dravidian and pan-Indian mythologies, carrying layered meanings tied to themes of guardianship, fertility and strength. These figures transcend their ornamental roles, embodying the syncretic essence of Kerala's cultural and art traditions, where localized traditions harmonize with broader Indic narratives to create a dynamic cultural continuum. The festival's tapestry of narratives reveals the fluidity and adaptability of cultural practices, illustrating how communities reinterpret their traditions in response to shifting social contexts. This reinterpretation is not merely a nostalgic homage to the past but an intentional act of cultural negotiation, reflecting the tensions and harmonies that define collective identity. By integrating these effigies into the ritualistic framework, the festival becomes a site where traditions are both preserved and transformed, emphasizing the active role of cultural symbols in shaping and sustaining communal identity. Far from being static relics, these effigies emerge as agents of cultural continuity and innovation, reaffirming tradition while accommodating evolving meanings within Kerala's rich spiritual and cultural legacy.

The effigy of the *Padayani Master* serves as a layered social critique, representing an authoritative figure who oversees and orchestrates the festival while simultaneously scrutinizing and critiquing everyone involved. This caricatured representation draws attention to the tensions inherent in hierarchical leadership, where the emphasis on control and fault-finding can undermine the spirit of collaboration and shared cultural expression. The exaggerated features of the effigy act as a satirical commentary on the flaws of authoritarianism, exposing the gap between the ideals of cultural preservation and the practical challenges of fostering inclusivity and creativity within the community. By doing so, the effigy not only critiques leadership dynamics but also reflects broader societal patterns of power, authority and resistance, urging a re-evaluation of how traditions are led and sustained.

The introduction of effigies such as Krishna and Kuchela into the *Neelamperoor Padayani* in the last decade exemplifies the festival's capacity for adaptation, showcasing its responsiveness to evolving cultural and spiritual values. Although traditionally absent from

this ritual, Krishna—who is widely revered in Hinduism—embodies themes of friendship and love, thereby linking this tradition to the broader levels of Hindu mythology. This incorporation reflects the festival's openness to embracing new representations, indicating a willingness to align itself with contemporary values while retaining its foundational myths.

The addition of the *Chandrayaan* effigy in 2023 highlights the festival's dynamic nature, illustrating how cultural practices can both preserve and transform over time. *Chandrayaan* represents a contemporary milestone in India's advancements in space exploration, making it a symbol of modern achievement. Its introduction into *Padayani* celebrates modernity and acknowledges the importance of contemporary accomplishments. This adaptation resonates with Clifford Geertz's concept of culture as an interconnected web where communities continually renegotiate their values and symbols to reflect both historical legacies and contemporary aspirations.

The Buddha effigy introduced in 2024 embodies a rich interplay of historical, cultural and philosophical dimensions, reflecting the village's Buddhist heritage and the enduring influence of this spiritual tradition despite its decline. The effigy symbolizing peace, compassion and enlightenment, stands in contrast to the intense and performative aspects of this art, highlighting the dual themes of introspection and communal celebration. By incorporating Buddha into a ritual that celebrates fertility and community identity, the festival underscores the interconnectedness of personal enlightenment and collective well-being. In this way, this effigy serves as a cultural bridge, linking spiritual reflection to communal heritage and reinforcing *Padayani*'s role as an evolving dialogue between history, mythology and contemporary cultural values.

The effigies used in the art form are far from being mere artistic creations; they represent deities, celestial beings and divine energies in material form. The symbolic use of natural materials such as leaves, flowers and other natural materials for crafting these effigies indicates a deep connection between the spiritual and natural worlds. In this context, the effigies become sacred symbols that bind the

performers to the divine. The presence of effigies in ritual dance performances is a recurring motif in global religious traditions, where symbols and physical representations transcend the mundane to act as mediums for spiritual interaction. These symbolic performances are not only a form of worship but also a communal plea for protection from evil forces, diseases and natural calamities. Through the synchronized movements of the effigies and the rhythmic beats, the village comes together to engage in collective devotion—a shared experience that becomes a channel for spiritual communion. The concept of shared belief and collective protection in *Neelamperoor Padayani* finds parallels in local traditions like *Ratholsavam* in Kalpathi and the *Kettukazcha* of Travancore. These festivals, much like *Neelamperoor Padayani*, involve the creation and procession of effigies or symbolic representations of deities, accompanied by music and dance, fostering a sense of unity and spiritual connection within the community. This practice of communal participation in effigy processions is not limited to Kerala but resonates globally, as seen in the Buddhist-inspired chariot festivals in Indonesia. Across these diverse cultural contexts, the rituals serve to bridge the human and divine, reinforcing collective identity and the power of shared cultural expressions.

The devotional dance or *Thullal* in this *Padayani* parallels the practice of Sufi whirling dervishes, as both use physical movement to create a connection between the human and the divine. In *Thullal*, dancers embody the divine essence through energetic and ecstatic performances, accompanied by drumming and chanting, to invoke the divine presence. Similarly, in the Sufi tradition, the whirling dance symbolizes the soul's journey toward divine truth, shedding worldly attachments and achieving communion with God. Both rituals emphasize how physical exertion can serve as a conduit to the divine, where the dancer transcends the self, merging with a higher spiritual state.

The effigies in *Neelamperoor Padayani* play a crucial role in fostering collective identity, reflecting the village's shared beliefs, cultural practices, and rituals. The communal effort involved in preparing the effigies, rehearsing the dances, and participating in the

performance strengthens the bond among the villagers, creating a shared sense of purpose. This collective ritual space is not just an artistic expression but a testament to the resilience of community traditions, emphasizing that every individual's action, no matter how small, contributes to the well-being and identity of the group. As Victor Turner argues, the “activation of an ordered succession of symbols” (1969, p.93) in this art—through the effigies, dances, and songs—serves to communicate cultural meanings and reinforce social harmony. The emphasis on togetherness, which represents collective identity, fosters a strong sense of belonging and shared purpose, ensuring the continuity and resilience of the community's cultural heritage.

Conclusion

By applying the interpretive methodology of Clifford Geertz, the paper highlights several significant findings. *Neelamperor Padayani* plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage, ensuring that essential knowledge, values, and practices are passed down through generations, even in the face of modern challenges. The rituals, symbols and practices embedded in this art can be understood as texts, offering deep insights into the community's worldview, belief systems and social structures. This interpretive approach highlights the significance of this *Padayani* in fostering social cohesion, as communal participation in the festival strengthens shared beliefs, collective identity, and solidarity. The use of natural materials demonstrates a strong ecological consciousness, connecting the community to its environment while promoting sustainability. Its resistance to commercialization and priestly influence serves as a form of cultural resistance, safeguarding its authenticity against external pressures. In addition, the festival functions at the intersection of sacred and secular identities, allowing for the integration of both religious devotion and social engagement. Finally, the effigies and performances in this art act as subtle forms of social commentary, reflecting and critiquing contemporary societal norms and values while providing a space for the community to reflect on current issues.

These findings collectively emphasize the multifaceted nature of *Neelamperoor Padayani*, demonstrating how it functions as a

dynamic, evolving tradition that embodies cultural, social, ecological and spiritual significance for the community.

Neelamperoor Padayani festival stands as a powerful expression of community resilience, where cultural traditions evolve through the dynamic integration of spirituality, artistic practices and social engagement. As a living cultural performance, it encapsulates the collective wisdom of a community that navigates the complexities of maintaining tradition in the modern age. Rather than being simply a preservation of the past, this *Padayani* serves as a continual reimagining of identity, where ritual acts as both a reflection and a shaping force of contemporary community life. The evolving nature of this festival, with its emphasis on inclusivity and adaptability, reflects a broader cultural philosophy that embraces change while remaining grounded in its roots. In this sense, it becomes more than a ritual; it is a lens through which the community can negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity, forging a path for cultural survival in an ever-changing world. As such, the future of *Neelamperoor Padayani* and similar traditions lies not only in their preservation but also in their capacity to adapt, ensuring their relevance for generations to come.

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