

Thidambu Nritham of Malabar: A Preliminary Analytical Study of Ritual and Cultural Tradition in Northern Kerala

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Theory Thidambu; Nritham; Malabar; Temple ritual; Dance rhythm; Kaliyamarddana

Article history:

Received 16 June 2025

Revised 3 November 2025

Accepted 30 November 2025

Available online

31 December 2025



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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32734/ijl189t44>

ABSTRACT

The northern part of Kerala state is known as Malabar region and thidambu nritham is a unique ritualistic dance form customary in the region. It is a dance with the replica of the presiding deity on the head. This paper explores the characteristics of key rituals, percussion accompaniment, rhythms and legends connected to thidambu nritham involving presentation of the results of the preliminary analytic research. Thidambu nritham is the last event among the sequence of events such as sreebhoothabali, processions, ashtapadi and chendamelam. The geometry as well as shape of the frame used to decorate thidambu correspond to the region in which the festival is organized. King Kolathiri was the patron of the event which began in a rough and ready form in the 13th century AD which combined shaivism (concept of sivapurana) and vaishnavism (concept of kaliyamarddana) prevalent in those days in the south India.

How to cite:

Namboothiri, P.G., & Puthumana, G. (2025). Thidambu nritham of Malabar: A preliminary analytical study of ritual and cultural tradition in Northern Kerala. *Humanities & Language: International Journal of Linguistics, Humanities, and Education*, 2(4), 186-192.

1. Introduction

Thidambu nritham is a rich cultural tradition of ancient Kerala. It is known as a ritualistic temple folk culture in the Northern districts of Malabar. The historians mentions that thidambu nritham is a village ritual introduced by King Kolathiri along with several other rituals probably in the 13th century AD (Narayanan, 2000; Chaudhuri, 1985). It is doubtful whether thidambu nritham can be considered as a classical dance form of Kerala due to the rituals connected with its presentation. The temple rituals are not normally included in the category of dances. Thidambu nritham is one of the oldest and divine temple performances of the ancient Kerala with a background of martial training and medicinal concepts in ayurveda (Kurup, 1997; Patwardhan, 2014; Rao & Devi, 1993). It is not merely a temple custom, but a special dance comprising of flexible movements, graceful moves and jumping techniques (Devi, 1993; Vatsyayan, 1977). The accompaniment of rhythm, drumming and playing of percussion instruments makes it the central attraction in the annual temple ceremonies. The trained expert in thidambu nritham with flexible body image and posture carrying thidambu on his head displays the performance in the temple courtyard which reminds the spectators of the ancient legendary stories and prowess of the old generation. The sensational footsteps trigger a feeling of excitement in the eyes, ears as well as the minds of the viewers.

Since the past seven hundred years, thidambu nritham dance had been presented primarily in the temple premises. The exact origin of thidambu nritham could not be traced. However, the emergence of Brahmin power and association with Kolathiris in the temple rituals in the North Malabar of Kerala state in India might have paved the way for emergence of thidambu nritham (Anderson, 1993). The history of thidambu nritham begins in the culture developed between two rivers – Netravati river in the north near Mangalore in Karnataka and korapuzha river in the south near Elathur in Kozhikode district (Anderson, 1993; Arjun & Breckenridge, 1976; Duarate, 1995; Cherian, 1999). The regular ritual of *sheeveli* used to be observed during the temple festival seasons held once in a year. The long-established old ritualistic thidambu nritham is in the phase of extermination (Killius, 2006; Khokar, 2003). There are several centuries old conventional dance steps which needs to be preserved for the succeeding generations.

The history of Indian classical dance forms, origin and development over centuries has been extensively reported in the literature. Similarly, the open literature includes preface reports of temple rituals. The systematic and scientific treatment of inferences from the performances, legends as well as the folklore facets remains yet unexplored. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to uncover the cultural behavior involving ritualistic features of thidambu nritham, decoration of thidambu, percussion accompaniment, legends and historical aspects of the temple dance.

2. Thidambu nritham rituals

The functions related to thidambu nritham normally begin with receiving of *prabha* by the dancer from the chief priest of the temple. This tradition is the authorization by the priest to take hold of the responsibility of decoration as well as presentation of thidambu nritham at the temple. The *prabha* is a semi-circular object made of a traditional five-metal alloy of sacred significance. In temples, the number of days of annual festivals can range from 2 to 14. In most of the temples, thidambu nritham will be performed on the last day of the festival.

Thidambu is the miniature of the idol of presiding deity. Thidambu nritham is completely done as a ritual, traditionally after the *sreebhoothabali* and *sheeveli ezhunnallath*. The other events before thidambu nritham at temples include ashtapadi edakkapaattu, panchavadyam and chendamelam, see Figure 1. In big celebrations such as arattu uthsavam, representatives of the village dressed in the costume of a warrior will lead the festival from beginning till end.

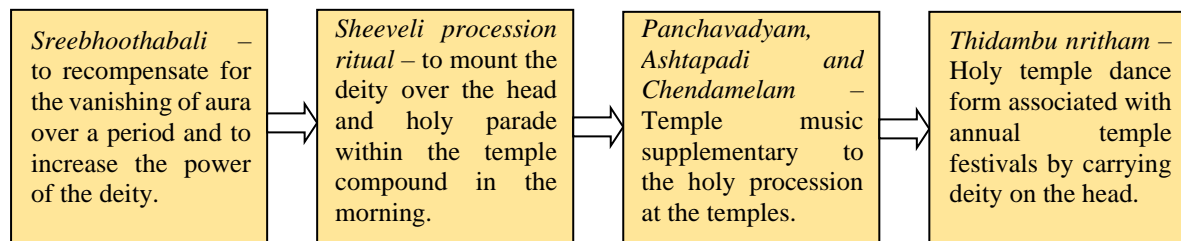

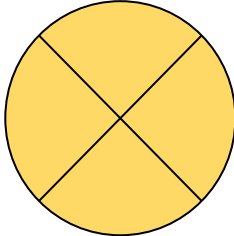

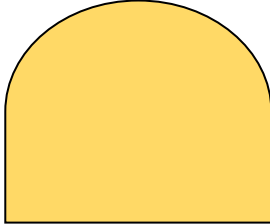


Figure 1. The order of thidambu nritham rituals at temples during annual festival

The shape and configuration of thidambu is very important to identify the region in which the dance is performed, see Table 1. The frame used for preparation of thidambu is of two types: kudachattam and marachattam. In Malayalam language, kuda means umbrella, and when the frame resembles umbrella made of bamboo and of circular shape, it is known as kudachattam. On the other hand, if the frame is made fully

of wood and of semicircular form, it is known as mara chattam, maram in Malayalam means wood.

Table 1. Shape and configuration of thidambu according to the geometry of the frame used

Type of frame used to connect the image of the deity (<i>chattam</i>)	Typical photograph of decorated thidambu using the type of frame	Shape or pattern (definition-based illustration)
Kudachattam		
Marachattam		

The percussion instruments used for taking out the thidambu from sanctum sanctorum are *paani* and *thimila*. In the temple courtyard, a tusker bears thidambu during the festival. The players of percussion instruments such as *valamthala*, *uruttuchenda*, *ilathaalam*, *sruthi* and *kuzhal* assembles in front of the tusker along a line. The elephant holds thidambu while the percussionists follow variety of rhythm styles. After the *ezhunnallathu* over the elephants, the audience will be prepared to watch the thidambu nritham. In the olden days, the thidambu nritham dancers display amazing dance steps like a martial art. The spectators also enjoy the footsteps and rhythmic movements. The rhythm varies with low tempo, medium tempo and high tempo at regular intervals.

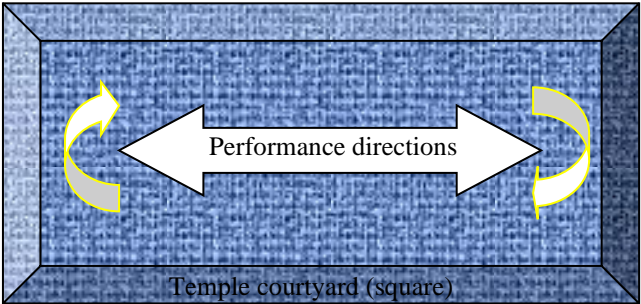


Figure 2. A schematic illustration of thidambu nritham performance space and directions in the temple courtyard

After the thidambu nritham inside the temple square, the viewers goes back and dancer returns to the temple carrying the thidambu in his left hand (Figure 2). The *thidambu* is positioned back at its yearlong previous position only after carrying out regular rituals inside.

The sequence of actions, gestures and foot movement progress in thidambu nritham is basically of four types; they are: Thakiladi, adantha, chmpada and panchari. The dancer as well as the viewers gets immersed in the rhythm and tunes of the percussion instruments. The feet trajectory in the forefront, percussion application as the escort and vocal dominion in the atmosphere including '*thithi thaihitha thomthom thaihitha*' in chambada makes it a delightful experience. The rhythms repeats in rapidity replicate on the dancer's steps again and again. When the swiftness of feet movements reaches the peak, the dancer tracks a circumambulation around the temple in the right direction. Each encircling *thaalam* completes in *kalaasham*. After reaching the finishing point of *thakiladi*, *adantha*, *chempada* and *panchari* with rapid and deep steps, the pace speeds up in *ekataalam* in the '*thomthathinthakka*' move mode, see Figure 3. The footsteps and movements accelerate to gain momentum over to sprints in the temple square. The last event in thidambu nritham is the circumambulation around the biggest *balikallu* right in front of the temple, which is the biggest energy reservoir in the temple.

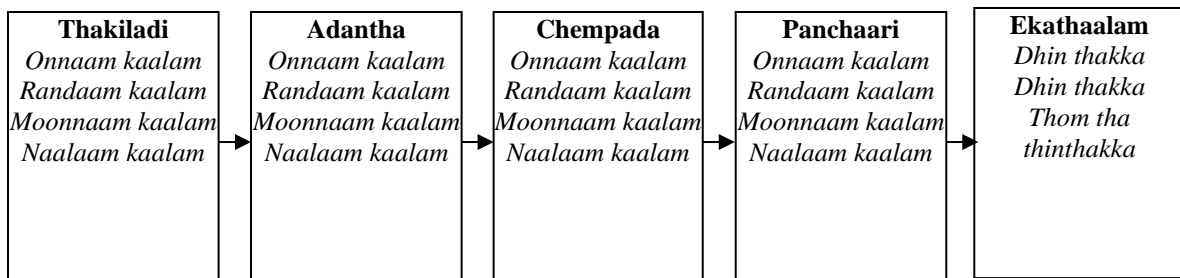


Figure 3. Sequence of rhythms in thidambu nritham indicating the succession of tempo in order

The inherent characteristic or permanent mood of thidambu nritham is the hopeful and devotional worship directed towards the deity represented in terms of the thidambu, demonstrated as lively participation in the accompanying events by the villagers. The allied events such as *arattu*, *sheeveli* and *ezhunnallathu* also are characterized by the grace of promptness filled with vigor and dedication. A prolific coordination of the silent and godly observance of the ritual, as well as the display of visual repletion of the folk dance by the dancer differentiates thidambu nritham from other traditional dances.

The events related to the preparation of *chattam* in the thidambu nritham are done in three phases. The preparation of the frame required to set in the silver and gold ornaments, flowers, clothes and flower as well as leaf garlands is in the first phase. It is an exceptionally sacred event performed inside the temple walls and by observing strict silence. The decoration of the two parts of the frame known as *chattam* separately in the front and the back is the second phase. This involves appropriate selection of the flower garlands, temperament, color and thickness to be placed on to the frame. Subsequently, the silver and gold ornaments are connected to the frame with the help of the midrib of the coconut leaf. The front and the back faces are hence finished and temporarily joined tightly and secured which completes the third phase.

In thidambu nritham, the centre of the festival is the temple, which normally will be at the middle of the village. After the day's work, villagers gather inside the temple complex. With the companionship of percussion band team, colorful umbrellas, flags

and spoken commands linking 'govinda..govinda' the devotees join the event. The villagers carrying flambeau torch following the procession is a panoramic visual experience for spectators. Thidambu nritham starts with a kotti urayikkal ceremony, after which the dancer starts the foot movements. The drummers and two persons carrying oil lamps moves on either directions of the corridor to provide the dancer enough space to demonstrate his concert. The footsteps of performer pursue increments and amplification in rhythm traditionally known as *iratti* and *meliratti*. The dancer ends all the steps with ending ceremony known as *kalaasham*, after which all the viewers assembled on either side of the sacred front-yard rushes behind the divine procession around the temple. When thidambu nritham ends the devotees joins the artist behind by chanting 'govinda hari govinda' the sacred slogan at the temple surroundings.

3. Percussion accompaniment

The accompanying instruments for thidambu nritham at temples involve *valamthala chenda*, *uruttu chenda*, *ilathaalam*, *kombu* and *kuzhal*. The intensity of rhythm of foot movement increases also with the intensity of the drumming. The subterranean knowledge of the dance performer in basic foot placements (*adisthaanam*) is crucial in controlling the rate of ascensions as well as the descensions of the rhythm. In both ascensions as well as the descensions of thidambu nritham, the main accompanying instrument is the *valamthala chenda*. The beginning is with *kotti urayikkal* ceremony, the vocal announcement of the rhythm resembles the following:

Dhaam – dha – dhi – dhaam
Dhaam – dha – dhi - dhaam
Dhaam – dha – dhi
Dheem -dheem- thaka -thaka
Dheem- thaka –dheem -thaka
Dheem- tha- dheem- tha- dheem.

The dancer starts his foot movements with rhythm of thakilati in the following order of rhythm:

Thi- thi – thi – dhaam
Thi – thi - thi – thi – dhaam
Dhaam – tha – dhi – Dhaam
Thi – dhaam – thi – dhaam
Dheem – dheem – dheem – dheem – dheem – dheem

Similarly, there are succession of rhythm for other rounds of *adantha*, *chempata* and *panchaari*. When the tempo of the leg movements increases, rhythm increases and rate of the speed of thidambu nritham amplifies. Once all the levels of one rhythm is displayed, stage is set for the next rhythm, and so on. It is a incredible sight to see the audience moves of head, hands and legs with the delight of the footsteps.

3.1 Costume and appearance

The thidambu nritham performer wears the dress of typical Brahmin priest in south India. Specially prepared thick cloth of white color is used to prepare the turban known

as *unshipeedam* borders of which is threaded using gold shaped cloth. A projection is made at the back part of the turban. The dancer wears armlet, bracelet and golden beads ornaments. The dress normally include dhotis of white color tightened using a girdle. The dancer is distinguished by a sectarian mark worn on the forehead, and with white and red sandal marks on the upper part of the body. A colored cloth of silk (*uttareeya*) will be worn across the upper part of the body towards right hand side.

4. Folk, legends and historical facts

It is known since olden times that sivapurana, kaliyamarddana and akroorabhakti are the stories behind the thidambu nritham. North Malabar is the region where thidambu nritham was originated. The holy dance of Lord Siva on the pradosham day and sivarathri are of the *tandava* style. The dance steps are according to the texts in sivapurana. Kaliyamardana is another myth. The *gopa* boys were playing near the banks of river *Kalindi*. The *gopa* boys, girls and herd of cows fell unconscious with poison spilled out by serpent *kaliya*. Lord Krishna jumped on to the hood of *kaliya* and started dancing. The *gopas* were awakened by Lord Krishna and the dance steps were further displayed by all together. The deity of god is carried and displayed over the head of the dancer throughout the dance performance. In the earlier days of introduction of thidambu nritham, King Kolathiri used to visit the temple to watch thidambu nritham performed at the midnight. The chief priest of the temple as well as the priest *tantri* should be present to begin the dance. While the kotti urayikkal ceremony is conducted, a handful of flowers is thrown on to the *thidambu* to mark the belief that angles and celestial gods are happy and contented with the dance. It is also believed that the king gains the blessings of god through active participation with the folk. It is also believed that thidambu nritham steps are divine foot movements based on Dravidian ritualistic tradition of following footsteps of Lord Krishna by devotee Akroora.

On the evening of the day before the beginning of the annual temple festival, the temple is decorated with coconut leaves, banana leaves and orange flowers (*jamanthi*). Prior to the longer festivals such as *arattu uthsavam*, the event begins with drumming near the temple pond in the presence of patrons of the temple as well as the festival. The holy experience occurs in rhythm *chempada*. When all the patrons, council of the temple authorities and trustees arrive, the event concludes in *kalaasham* beat. Furthermore, all the members, drummers and dancer walks toward the flagstaff of the temples and assembles near it. The image of the deity is taken out of the temple accompanied by holy rituals and is circumambulated around the temple known as *sheeveli*. The complementary drumming approach involves *chempada*, *muriyadantha*, *adantha*, *thripuda* and *panchaari*.

Thidambu nritham is a visual and aggressive dance delight coordinated and interlinked with rituals. It grants a highly propitious heavenly feeling to the devotees. The temple will be lighted up with earthen lamps all around on the walls. The traditional style of dressing, costumes and drumming need to be maintained to retain the uniqueness of thidambu nritham.

5. Conclusions

The classic tradition of Indian temple dances could be clearly witnessed in thidambu nritham though several rituals are inter-connected with the performance at temples. The sequence of the festival ceremonies indicate that *vadya* (rhythm), *gita* (song) is followed by the *nritha* (dance), clearly highlighting the old culture and tradition. It is evident that the basis for thidambu nritham could be traced 700 years back on the

background of lord Krishna's footsteps over the serpent kaliya and divine *taandava* dance of Lord siva on the pradosha day. It appears that the representative of the Kolathiri dynasty introduced thidambu nritham at temples in Malabar to unite the villagers to create a synergistic atmosphere at the beginning of the harvest season. The decoration of *thidambu* and the ornamented frame surrounding the thidambu represents the features of the village in which the temple is located. The minimalism principle regarding use of costumes in thidambu nritham symbolize the dancer as one among the thousands of devotees witnessing the thidambu nritham dance performance.

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