

## **A Living Legacy: Ayirur Kathakali Gramam as a Model for Intangible Cultural Heritage**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the fascinating case of Ayirur Kathakali Gramam (formerly Ayroor) in India. This village is a remarkable example of how intangible cultural heritage (ICH) can thrive. For centuries, the community has kept alive the art form of Kathakali, a classical dance-drama. The paper explores how Ayirur Kathakali Gramam exemplifies the ongoing transmission, performance, and even subtle evolution of cultural practices within a community. The concept of ICH is central to this study. ICH refers to the traditions, practices, and expressions that define a community's identity and continuity, existing beyond physical objects. By looking at Ayirur's dedication to Kathakali, evident in their annual temple performances, resident artist families, and even their recent village name change, the paper highlights the importance of community-based transmission and social cohesion in preserving ICH. This analysis goes beyond just safeguarding traditions. The paper explores how Kathakali performances in Ayirur, while deeply rooted in tradition, might incorporate subtle changes over time. These adaptations ensure the art form stays relevant and artistically vibrant, showcasing the dynamic nature of living cultural heritage.

The true value of Ayirur Kathakali Gramam lies in its embodiment of a successful ICH model. Studying this case offers valuable insights into how to foster cultural transmission, ensure the livelihood of artists, and navigate the challenges ICH faces in the modern world. Understanding and supporting communities like Ayirur is crucial for safeguarding the richness and diversity of intangible cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** *kathakali, cultural, heritage, ayirur, village, gramam, social, art form, community*

### **Cultural Heritage: A Living Legacy Beyond Museums and Monuments**

Cultural heritage is more than just dusty museums and ancient ruins. It's a vibrant tapestry woven from three distinct, yet interconnected threads: aesthetics, history, and social value. These elements hold significance not just for the present generation, but also for those who came before us and those who will follow (Smith and González-Romero 1). The path to uncovering the beauty of hidden things, at the same time, adding colour to the stories from the past. This thread is all about the artistic expressions that define a culture. It encompasses the visual arts like paintings and sculptures that capture the beauty of a bygone era. Music and dance weave emotions and stories into the tapestry, while literature, from poems to epics, provides a window into the hearts and minds of people. These artistic expressions are testaments of the creativity and ingenuity of a particular time and place.

Cultural heritage serves as a vital bridge, connecting us to the lives, traditions, and experiences of our ancestors. Through ancient buildings, artifacts, and stories passed down, we gain a glimpse into how societies evolved. We learn what they valued, how they

interacted with the world, and the challenges they faced. Cultural heritage allows us to understand the roots that shaped the present. Cultural heritage extends far beyond the walls of museums and the shadows of ancient ruins. It's a vibrant tapestry woven with three vital threads: aesthetics, history, and, crucially, social value (Smith and Pearson, 2015). This tapestry binds not just the present, but the past and future generations, weaving a powerful sense of shared identity.

This thread explores the profound social impact of cultural heritage. Shared traditions, practices, and beliefs create a sense of belonging within a community. Imagine a community celebrating a harvest festival, passing down stories through generations, or participating in a traditional dance. These shared experiences foster social cohesion and a feeling of unity and connection. Cultural heritage can also be a source of immense pride, allowing communities to celebrate their unique heritage and traditions. Furthermore, it serves as a powerful tool for education, transmitting knowledge and skills across generations. Living heritage provides meaning in the everyday lives of communities, groups, and individuals, and a sense of identity, continuity, and belonging that contributes to their well-being (UNESCO, 9). The concept of cultural heritage has become more inclusive over time. Traditionally, it focused on tangible aspects, like the grand buildings, awe-inspiring artifacts, and remnants of past civilizations left behind. But today, we recognize the immense value of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as well.

**Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH):** This encompasses the invisible threads of a culture – the traditions, practices, knowledge, and skills passed down within communities. It's the art of storytelling, the rhythm of a language, the intricate techniques of traditional crafts, the rituals that mark life's milestones, and the customs that define social interactions. ICH reflects the core values, beliefs, and very way of life of a specific group, often embedded in their

everyday practices. The very essence of ICH, its reliance on continued transmission, makes it vulnerable in our rapidly changing world. The communities themselves have safeguarding planning, because it is mandatory to protect their rich culture, as there are some challenges to destroying them. The dominance of the global media is actually threatening the ways of local traditions and along with that, the methods of globalisation played a role in it. Changes in living standards and sudden changes in lifestyles and environment can lead to the end of following traditional practices and the transmission of those unique traditions. Due to the lack of awareness among the people is making the ICH undervalued. The community must safeguard the traditions to transfer the uniqueness of these traditions from generation to generation. Understanding the challenges is mandatory in fixing the problems related to this as well as safeguarding it.

### **Ayirur Kathakali Gramam: A Village Steeped in the Enchantment of Kathakali**

Ayroor, a village in the Pathanamthitta district is nestled on the banks of the holy river Pampa in Kerala, India, and is known for its rich tradition of Kathakali. Today, Ayroor has got a new name - Ayirur Kathakali Gramam (formerly known as Ayroor). This isn't just any village; it's a living testament to a centuries-old classical dance-drama form, where Kathakali isn't merely a performance, but a way of life. It is just not a mere story but the pure hard work of the residents of the village for a long period of 12 years. It is their belief and continued effort that made the authorities understand the value of their rich tradition and as a result, they gained a new name, this name signifies the long history and the effort of the residents to make the art form Kathakali alive.

The village, now, Ayirur Kathakali Gramam, has a long-standing tradition of Kathakali performances. Several talented artists and troupes are born following this rich tradition of Kathakali and moulding it as their passion and profession. There is a Mahadeva

temple in this village that conducts Kathakali performances annually during the temple festival which not only plays the role of temple ritual but also draws large crowds of devotees and tourists to this place. So, Ayirur is considered one of the important centres of Kathakali in Kerala. Due to the efforts of Sankara Panicker of the Chirakuzhiyil family, Kathakali was made more common to the public. In the olden days, it was a special performance performed only within the walls of the temples. Back in the day, not everyone was allowed inside a temple; hence, the art form didn't reach the masses. Today, the village of Ayirur has produced a long line of Kathakali artists and they continue to inspire the younger generation (Times of India). The exact origins of Kathakali in Ayirur Kathakali Gramam remain shrouded in a veil of time. However, historical estimates suggest the tradition has flourished for at least 200 years, if not more. This village boasts a unique lineage, where families have dedicated generations to mastering and transmitting the intricate art of Kathakali.

### **Kathakali: A Dance of Painted Faces and Enthralling Stories**

Kathakali is more than just graceful movements. It's a visual and aural feast, where elaborate costumes, captivating storytelling, and powerful musical accompaniment come together to create a mesmerising experience. The performers, adorned in colourful makeup and elaborate headgear, portray characters from Hindu mythology and epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Their expressive eyes, hand gestures (mudras), and dynamic footwork breathe life into these timeless stories. The rhythmic beats of the "chenda" (drum), the haunting melodies of the "chanteurs" (vocalists), and the clanging cymbals create a captivating soundscape that heightens the emotional impact of the performance.

The influence of Kathakali extends beyond the stage in Ayirur Kathakali Gramam. The village itself pulsates with the rhythm of this art form. Imagine children mimicking the mudras they see practised by elders, the sounds of rehearsals wafting from homes, and

conversations infused with discussions about upcoming performances. Even the recent renaming of the village to Ayirur Kathakali Gramam signifies the deep connection and pride the community holds for this cherished tradition. This detailed introduction to Ayirur Kathakali Gramam paints a vivid picture of a village where Kathakali is not just a performance, but a vibrant cultural tapestry woven into the very fabric of life.

### **A Village Woven with Threads of Kathakali: Diverse Engagement and Enduring Social Value**

This art form flourishes not only due to the dance drama; but also the diverse ways of community engagement create a path for it. usually narrates the stories from Hindu mythology, but here stories from the Bible are also played with much enthusiasm and respect. Raj, who is one of the third generation of the family of artists started a club for this art form, he is not a performer but his liking and as a step for developing his passion for prompted him to create this club with some of his friends. As per the request of this club in 2010; Grama Panchayat passed a resolution to change the name of the village to Ayirur Gramam. Sankara Panicker of the Chirakuzhiyil family in the Puthezham area of the village started teaching Kathakali in his ancestral home, but people from the downtrodden section of the society were not allowed to enter. After the setting up of this particular club, they began to teach hand gestures (hand gestures) to children between the ages of 1 and 10. As the interest in the art form flourished among the students, the club decided to organise a seven-day festival every year in January, not only just for teaching mudras but also for conducting Kathakali performances. The Club has presented Kathakali adaptations of renowned Malayalam poems like 'Kurathy' and 'Kattalan'. Additionally, they've showcased Kathakali renditions of biblical narratives such as 'The Prodigal Son' (Mudiyanyaya Puthran) and 'Mary Magdalene'

(Magdalene Mariam). Notably, the Club's performance of 'Unniyarcha', depicting the legendary female warrior from North Malabar Ballads, stands as a significant accomplishment (Kerala Tourism Website). In 2018, the proposal was accepted, but confusion in the spelling of the village delayed it again. While for ages the village's name was spelled 'Ayroor', the Surveyor General of India was of the view that it should be 'Aiyurur' and the matter was sent back to the state for reconsideration. Thereafter, the process started again and the Revenue Commissioner said that the state government was in agreement with the name recommended by the Surveyor General of India, and in March of this year (2023) the renaming of the village was approved (Hindustan Times). Kathakali isn't confined to practise spaces. Annual temple performances in Mahadeva temple create a platform to showcase this art form to the wider community, fostering a shared cultural experience. These vibrant events become a celebration of heritage, where villagers of all ages gather to witness captivating stories unfold. At the same time, it draws tourists from different places to this village to enjoy the rich tradition and beauty of this village. By incorporating "Kathakali Gramam" (meaning "village of Kathakali") into their identity, the community declares their unwavering commitment to this art form. This act of collective pride showcases the deep-rooted connection between Kathakali and the very essence of the village.

Kathakali performances within Ayirur Kathakali Gramam extend far beyond mere entertainment; they hold immense social value for the community. Let's delve into these social aspects:

#### 1. Reinforcing Identity: Celebrating Who They Are

Festivals may constitute an arena that satisfies the need to belong and social identity creation and facilitates the development of place and personal identities (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013).

As villagers witness stories from Hindu mythology and the Bible come alive, they connect

with their cultural heritage on a deeper level. This shared experience strengthens their sense of belonging to a community steeped in this rich tradition. Kathakali becomes a symbol that sets them apart and defines who they are. Actually, this art form shapes your identity moulded by your rich tradition and culture.

## 2. Shared Participation: Weaving a Stronger Social Fabric

Engagement with Kathakali isn't limited to just the performers. The entire community participates, sometimes as an enthusiastic audience or sometimes as aspiring students who are eager to learn the hidden value of this art form. This shared participation fosters social cohesion within the community. Discussions about upcoming performances, the collective creativity leading up to the event, and the shared experience of witnessing the magic unfold – all these elements bind the community together. Kathakali transcends the stage, becoming a thread that strengthens the social fabric of Ayirur Kathakali Gramam.

### **Challenges and Considerations: Navigating the Tapestry**

While Ayirur Kathakali Gramam thrives on inclusivity, it's important to acknowledge potential challenges within cultural heritage practices. Here are some areas to consider:

1. Marginalisation Within the Tradition: Cultural heritage traditions can, at times, have limitations to participation. No social or economic factors can destroy the art which is the in-born talent of a person. But there are certain restrictions for certain groups of people. But later all those things are completely removed from the premises of art. Open discussions and initiatives to ensure broader participation can strengthen the overall cultural fabric.

2. Tourism: A Catalyst for Growth and Sustainability: Tourism can play a significant role in Ayirur Kathakali Gramam. The annual festival arranged in Mahadeva Temple and events arranged by the Kathakali club attract a large number of people. At the same time, it can also



increase the funding and support for preserving this art form. However, it's crucial to maintain authenticity. Around 20,000 children turn up every year at the club in the village to learn about Kathakali. Performances should cater to the community's cultural expression while remaining accessible to visitors. Striking this balance is the key.

### **Ayirur Kathakali Gramam: A Model for Safeguarding ICH**

Ayirur Kathakali Gramam serves as a powerful model for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) due to its commitment to several key principles:

1. **Community-Based Transmission:** Generations of Kathakali artist families ensure that knowledge and skills are passed down meticulously within the community. This familial transmission fosters a deep respect for the art form and its traditions. They are teaching interested students and also organising Kathakali performances on different occasions. And, the focus is not only on stories from Hindu Mythology but also on the stories of the Bible. So people from different communities can be a part of this.
2. **Social Cohesion and Shared Identity:** Kathakali performances strengthen the community's social fabric. Shared experiences, discussions, and celebrations create a strong sense of belonging and collective identity. Kathakali requires a high degree of collaboration between musicians, singers, dancers, and makeup artists. This teamwork strengthens bonds and fosters a sense of unity within the participating groups. Kathakali can be considered as a tool for education because the art form is sharing the stories of history, and mythology and giving awareness about the culture and identity.
3. **Preserving Traditions with Adaptability:** While core aspects of Kathakali are preserved, there's room for subtle adaptations to ensure its relevance. Interpretations of stories, for instance, might evolve with time, reflecting the community's changing social context.

Similarly, costume elements might be adapted for comfort while maintaining the essence of the art form. This adaptability ensures Kathakali remains vibrant and continues to resonate with future generations. Even if the seeds of Kathakali were sown 200 years ago, the same tradition is successfully followed today.

### **Conclusion: A Legacy Woven in Community**

Ayirur Kathakali Gramam stands as a testament to the power of community engagement in safeguarding ICH. The diverse ways the community interacts with Kathakali – from dedicated artist families to enthusiastic audiences – illustrate the profound value they place on their cultural heritage. This case study offers valuable insights for understanding and safeguarding other forms of ICH around the world. By fostering community-based transmission, promoting social cohesion through shared cultural experiences, and embracing necessary adaptations, communities can ensure their unique cultural heritage continues to thrive for generations to come.

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