

## **The Ritual of Kuthiyottam in Kerala: A Study on the Cultural and Archetypal Aspects of ‘Sacrifice’**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Traditional art forms, such as Kuthiyottam, play a significant role in preserving the cultural heritage of Kerala. These art forms have been passed down from generation to generation and continue to be an integral part of the state's cultural identity. Kuthiyottam is a traditional ritualistic art form that originated in the southern Indian state of Kerala. It is a highly revered art form performed during the annual temple festivals, mainly in Kerala's central and southern regions. It is a dance form performed by young boys between the ages of 8 and 14. It is believed to have originated in the early 17th century and has been passed down through generations. This dance form is a symbol of devotion, discipline, and sacrifice, and it is considered a privilege, an honour, and a mark of respect to be chosen to perform it. It is a ritualistic symbolic representation of human ‘Bali’ (homicide). Folklore exponents see this art form, with enchanting, well-structured choreography and songs, as one of the rare ‘Adi Dravida’ folklore traditions still preserved and practised in Central Kerala by the true tradition and environment. The relevance of studying the cultural and archetypal aspects of Kuthiyottam brings into understanding it in the varied perspectives of both as a ritual and as an art form.

### **KEYWORDS**

Archetype; art; culture; Kuthiyottam; performance; ritual; sacrifice.

### **Introduction**

Traditional art forms, including Kuthiyottam, play a significant role in preserving and shaping Kerala's cultural identity. The rich cultural heritage of Kerala is reflected in its diverse range of traditional art forms, which include classical dance, music, theatre, martial arts, and puppetry, among others. These art forms, including Kuthiyottam, have been passed down from generation to

generation and continue to be an integral part of the state's cultural identity. They provide an excellent platform for local artists to showcase their talent and creativity. Kuthiyottam, in particular, with its unique blend of devotion, discipline, and sacrifice, not only stands as a symbol of Kerala's unique cultural heritage but also plays a crucial role in preserving it. Kerala's most popular traditional art forms are Kathakali, Kalarippayattu,

Kuthiyottam, Thiruvathirakali, Theyyam, Chavittunatakam, Mohiniyattam, etc.

### **Kuthiyottam: The Art**

Kuthiyottam is a traditional ritualistic art form that originated in the southern Indian state of Kerala. It is a highly revered art form performed during the annual temple festivals, mainly in Kerala's central and south regions. Kuthiyottam is a dance form performed by young boys between the ages of 8 and 14. The dancers are selected based on their physical fitness, agility, and gracefulness. The dance is performed in front of the temple deities as an offering and is meant to invoke their blessings. The dance is accompanied by percussion instruments such as Chenda, Maddallam, and Cymbals. The dancers wear colourful traditional attire that is adorned with jewellery and flowers. They also carry traditional weapons such as swords and shields. The dance consists of intricate footwork and graceful movements that are synchronised with the rhythm of the percussion instruments. The dancers also perform acrobatic feats such as somersaults and jumps. The dance is usually performed in a circular formation around a land lit in the centre.

Kuthiyottam is believed to have originated in the early 17th century and has been around for generations. This dance form symbolises devotion, discipline, and sacrifice, and performing it is considered a privilege. It is an art form deeply ingrained in Kerala's cultural and religious fabric. It is a testament to the state's rich heritage and tradition and continues to be celebrated with great zeal and enthusiasm.

### **Kuthiyottam: The Ritual**

The children begin their practice on the day of Shivarathri, and by Aswathy day, they become skilled enough to perform the steps independently. On Aswathy day, the children wake up early during the

auspicious time between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m., bathe, and apply 'chutti' (facial makeup). They wear loincloths and wrap steamed plantain leaves (vettiya vazhayila) around their waists and knees. This practice is rooted in the belief that the child's mother should not see their body during the ritual, as it would defy the ritual of 'bali' (death rites), preventing it from being performed.

This belief stems from a story in the Mahabharata, where King Duryodhana, after a bath, visits his mother Gandhari, covering only his waist with a plantain leaf. Gandhari, who is blindfolded out of devotion to her blind husband, removes her blindfold and gazes at Duryodhana. Her gaze strengthens every part of his body except for the portion covered by the plantain leaf, which becomes his weak spot. In the war, Bhima strikes Duryodhana in this vulnerable area to defeat him. Because of this, wearing plantain leaves symbolises vulnerability, and it is used in 'bali' rituals.

In the Kuthiyottam ritual, after wearing the plantain leaf wrap, the children are dressed with makeup and adorned with items like the Chutti, Kinnari, Thoppi, Kalthala, Kaithala, Kingini, a Thechi flower garland, a hat, and a knife with a ripe areca nut affixed to the tip. With the areca nut (pazhutha adakka) held above their heads, this knife is believed to protect the children as they proceed to the temple, warding off evil forces. The areca nut tree is considered a boon from Brahma, safeguarding the children during the ritual. Upon reaching the temple and standing before Devi, the knife and areca nut are removed, symbolising the submission of the children's lives to their beloved deity, Valiyakulangara Devi.

### **Kuthiyottam: The Performance**

After the makeup and other preparations of the children, they carry out the traditional practice of 'dakshina' and get permission from elders. They then proceed to the temple, accompanied by a

traditional orchestra and paraphernalia. The 'vazhi thalam steps' (special steps on the way during the procession) are the speciality of Valiyakulangara gurus. After reaching the temple edifice, the children are made to sit facing the Devi. The function of 'Chooral muriyuka' is performed (in olden times, the bamboo strips were shredded and sliced as strands to thread on the hips, but nowadays, golden and silver threads are used symbolically to do the 'Bali' karma). With threaded bamboo on both sides of the hips, the children step rhythmically to the music and go around the temple thrice. The devotee who offers the 'Kuthiyottam' vazhipadu removes the bamboo threads worn on the hips of the children. At the same time, they stand in front of the Devi after the three circumambulations and offer it to Devi. With this, the procedures for Kuthiyottam have been completed. The name 'Kuthiyottam' could have derived from the practice of using bamboo threads (chooral kuthiyittu) and the circumambulation of the temple (Gokulam1).

### **Kuthiyottam: The Devotee Offering**

The songs are primarily performed in four rhythms, commonly referred to as 'Padams', and it is mandatory to sing all four Padams each day. These songs recount the heroic deeds of Bhagavathi, detailing her victories over demons like Sumbani, Sumbas, and Darika, and are intended to honour her by praising her virtues. Additionally, some songs incorporate Sanskrit, drawing on well-known legends from the Puranas. Some older songs, known for their rich lyrical quality, reflect the creative abilities of the ancestors of Chettikulangara. The festival lasts seven days, from Sivarathri to the Bharani asterism, and during this time, the man who makes the offering teaches young boys, aged 8 to 14, various religious rituals.

In the early morning on Bharani, following the feast and other rituals, a

boy's body is wrapped with silver wires, with one end tied around his neck and an areca nut placed at the tip of a knife held above his head. He is then paraded to the temple with drumbeats, music, and decorative umbrellas. Along the way, tender coconut water is poured over his body until they reach the temple. Once there, the boy faces the 'Sreekovil' (Sanctum Sanctorum) and begins to dance. The ceremony concludes with awarding prizes to the 'Gurus' (teachers). When performed in pairs, this dance is called Iratta Kuthiyottam.

On this day, shortly after noon, the residents bring out large, decorated floats featuring effigies of chariots, horses, Bhima, Panchali, Hanuman, and more. At night, Devi's image is carried in a procession to the effigies placed in the paddy field, an event known as Kettukazhcha. These effigies return to their respective 'Kavu' (family worship places) the following day.

### **Kuthiyottam: The Stories**

A great King who ruled centuries back was lecherous. He used the women in his Kingdom to satisfy his carnal desires. His subjects could not speak against this or prevent him from his immoral ways. The only recourse was to pray to God and seek help, which the people did devotedly. At that time, a great saint visited the kingdom, and the subjects narrated their plight. As a remedy, the saint advised the people to a song with 4 'Padams' (Padam is a musical monologue resembling a 'Keertana' in structure and propagates love for God through innumerable aspects). The song has to be sung at dusk in front of Nilavilakku and Nirapara with appropriate steps and movements to appease Goddess Bhadra Kali. The Kuthiyottam we see and perform today is the structured form of 4 padams with suitable steps. Another story is that after the killing of 'Darika' (Asura or demon), the Goddess Bhadrakali was angry and agitated; she was in her fierce form.

Father Lord Siva created two children from the dirt of his body to calm her and kept them with Bhadrakali. After that, Lord Shiva dances at 'Kailasam', and today's 'Kuthiyottam' is reminiscent of Siva's feet.

Quite different from the above legends/stories, one of the Kuthiyottam songs narrates another story. A king who was an ardent devotee of 'Bhadrakali' performed 'Tapas' (meditation and religious austerity through denouncing all worldly pleasures) to appease her. The satisfied 'Bhadrakali' appeared before him and enquired whether his wish was fulfilled or if a boon was needed. The King asked for perpetual prosperity and freedom from all sorrows, ailments and diseases for his subjects. On hearing the wish of the King, Goddess Bhadrakali advised the King to get a perfect male child from someone in the Kingdom. She also suggested educating the child in 'Vedas' (ancient scriptures) and 'Sasthras' (sacred scriptures), and when the boy attains the age of 10, sacrifice the child to her for the King's wish fulfilment. To fulfil the recommendations /order of the Goddess Bhadrakali, the King had organised a ritualistic practice, and today's Kuthiyottam is derived from this event. To support this story, a Kuthiyottam song is still popular among performers. During the practice sessions at Valiyakulangara Temple, this song is sung in a high-pitched voice accompanied by the ideal steps, adding excellence to this music-dance form (Kumar).

### **Kuthiyottam: The Musical Instruments**

**Chenda:** The Chenda is a cylindrical percussion instrument that is widely used in Kerala's traditional art forms. It is a drum made of jackfruit tree wood and covered with animal skin. The Chenda has a distinct sound that is essential to Kuthiyottam's performance. The drummer plays the Chenda using two sticks, one thicker than the other and produces different tones by striking different drum

areas. In Kuthiyottam, the Chenda player sets the rhythm for the dance, and the dancers follow the beats. The Chenda is also used to create a sense of excitement and anticipation during the performance.

**Ilathalam:** The Ilathalam is a small brass cymbal played by striking two cymbals together. It is an important instrument used in Kuthiyottam, creating a rhythmic pattern that complements the Chenda's beats. It also enhances the performance's overall sound and adds an element of drama to the dance.

**Kurumkuzhal:** The Kurumkuzhal is a traditional wind instrument used in Kerala's music and dance forms. It is a long wooden flute that produces a rich, melodic sound. The Kurumkuzhal is played by blowing air into the instrument and using finger holes to change the pitch. In Kuthiyottam, the Kurumkuzhal creates a melodic background that complements the Chenda's beats. The flautist plays the Kurumkuzhal to create a serene, calming atmosphere that contrasts with Chenda's upbeat rhythms.

**Kuzhal:** The Kuzhal is a wind instrument similar to the flute. It is a long, straight pipe made of bamboo and produces a bright, sharp sound. The Kuzhal is played by blowing air into the instrument and using finger holes to change the pitch. In Kuthiyottam, the Kuzhal creates a festive, celebratory atmosphere. The musician plays the Kuzhal to add a sense of joy and excitement to the performance.

**Thimila:** The Thimila is another percussion instrument used in Kuthiyottam. It is a large cylindrical drum made of jackfruit tree wood and covered with animal skin. The Thimila produces a deep, resonant sound and is played using two sticks. In Kuthiyottam, the Thimila creates a sense of grandeur and drama. The Thimila player adds a powerful beat to the performance, enhancing the Chenda's rhythm (Prasad 1).

### **Kuthiyottam: The Cultural Aspect**

Kuthiyottam is a ritualistic dance form, and as a study, it can be approached from various perspectives. From a cultural perspective, it offers an insight into the traditions and customs of the people of Kerala. The dance form has a rich history and is deeply rooted in the local culture, and studying it can help one understand the various socio-cultural factors that have influenced its development over the years. More than just a religious art form, it is an art form with artistic value. From an artistic perspective, Kuthiyottam offers a unique blend of music, dance, and storytelling. It is a highly expressive art form involving intricate footwork, graceful movements, and vibrant costumes. Studying Kuthiyottam can help one appreciate the beauty and complexity of this art form and gain a deeper understanding of the techniques and styles used in traditional Indian dance. The most striking features of Kuthiyottam are the use of intricate footwork and graceful movements. The dancers use a range of gestures and body movements to convey emotions and tell stories. These movements are often synchronised with the music and drumming, creating a fluid and expressive performance that is beautiful and captivating. The costumes worn by the dancers in Kuthiyottam are also an essential part of the artistic expression. Kuthiyottam is also characterised by its use of storytelling. From an artistic perspective, Kuthiyottam is a complex and intricate dance form that requires skill, precision, and dedication.

### **Kuthiyottam: The Archetype of Sacrifice**

Every story of sacrifice includes the performance of a ritual. On a deeper philosophical level, sacrifice implies the total surrender of the self, the ego. In this sense, in Jungian terms, the sacrifice can be considered an objectification of the ego, a coercive moral superiority over the ego.

Theoretically approaching sacrifice, the historical categorisation can be made of animal sacrifice and human sacrifice. In modern rituals, both have been condemned, if not with a substitution by the animal sacrifice for the human. Again, human sacrifices are metaphorised in rituals where an imitation of the sacrifice is made, thus serving a symbolic function. Sacrificial themes can be found in every culture, including the Bible, Greek literature and Indian mythology.

Art as a vehicle and ritual in performance calls for mimesis, and the actions done in the ritual require a body for the enaction of the Self's surrender and the unification with the Divine. In Kuthiyottam, this is made possible through the selected boys. The child /children should be devotees' own or blood-related, without any diseases or deformities and between the ages of 5 and 12. Other children are adopted only if one's own or close related ones are not available. The children who had performed (the ritualistic practice of threading and removing bamboo slices called 'chooral muriyuka') before are not considered again. After getting/selecting the children, the devotee with his family, Gurus and others visit the Valiyakulangara temple on the Sivarathri day and offer prayers. The children are garlanded, Dakshina is offered to Devi, and the group proceeds to the Vazhipadu Bhavanam (the devotee's house offering the Kuthiyottam). The children are to stay in this house till the completion of the 'Kuthiyottam' vazhipadu. At dusk on Sivarathri day the children are taught the steps at the specially erected shed and mandapam (temple porch). It takes four days (till 'revathi' day) to teach the steps of the first to the fourth 'padam'. The step practice sessions are filled by the 'nadaswaram' (classical wind instrument), which supports the elders for '1 to 7 padam' songs & steps, sounds of other musical instruments and Vay'kurava of women (women producing a peculiar rhythmic

high-pitched sound by partly covering their mouth with hands, reserved for auspicious occasions).

### Conclusion

Essentially, the sacrifice ritual in Kuthiyottam is less ceremonious and more socially interactive. The ritual is conducted on behalf of a person or a family who seeks the deity's blessings. Richard Schechner has commented that performances of rites of passage are "inherently dramatic" because they "try to show others what they are doing or have done" and that the actions are usually "performed for an audience" (Pereira 384). Yet, as Turner and Grotowsky have pointed out, it is not just the performance that matters, but the activity itself is important – the raising of the 'pandal', marking the 'Devasthanam' and the dancers' positions, placing the 'Nirapara and Niranazhi', 'Deeparadhana', 'Pattusadya' and so on. Yet these are not considered part of the performance per se. In this sense, these activities should be

considered as a combination of several framing activities leading to the performance. Furthermore, certain other factors are essentially part of the ritual but again confined to the framing activity before the ceremony.

From a theoretical perspective, the theme of sacrifice is peculiarly interesting to the symbolic and narrative significance of the ritual. The performance of the ritual draws us to 'Homo performans' – the one, in Turner's terms, "who reveals himself to himself" (Pereira 383). This self-reflexivity is not confined to the performer but extends to the beholders. The performance of the ritual leads the performer to an enlightened knowledge of his 'Self' and leads the others to a better knowledge about their 'Selves'. Thus, it becomes important that the understanding of the ritual of Kuthiyottam, any ritual performance for that matter, be not confined to the formal and contextual meanings alone.

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