



Revisiting the Role of Kuthiyottam in the Socio-Cultural Fabric of Kerala

Gadha T.R¹, Rajalekshmi P², Dr. Krishnajamol K³

^{1, 2, 3} Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India

Email: ¹ gadhatr@gmail.com, ² rnairlekshmi578@gmail.com,

³ krishnajamolk@am.amrita.edu

Abstract

Kuthiyottam is a form of ceremonial dance, widely celebrated in the state of Kerala in celebration of the annual Pongala festival. It is originated from the Tamil art form of 'Ammankudam'. This dance form is performed by young men wearing traditional costumes and carrying wooden swords as props. The dance form is performed in honour of Goddess Bhadrakali or Durga, who is considered to be the mighty and fierce warrior goddess. The dance form is an integral part of Kerala's cultural heritage and has been practiced for generations. This paper explores the socio-cultural significance of Kuthiyottam in the Kerala context and how it has influenced the cultural activities of the people and vice versa. The changes in practising this ritual during the ancient and contemporary time and its reasons are also analysed with the help of various theories- cultural ecology, performance theory, symbolic anthropology, etc. This study is conducted on the basis of Kuthiyottam conducted in different regions such as Chettikulangara, Valiyakulangara, Kadakkal and Attukal.

Keywords: Kuthiyottam, socio-cultural anthropology, cultural ecology, performance theory, symbolic anthropology.

1. Introduction

Kerala is well known for its rich culture. The art forms present in Kerala, makes this region unique in its own manner. The most important thing to highlight here regarding these art forms and its performances is that; these art forms were passed on to the present generation from the past generations over decades. This will continue performing even in future as these sacred art forms are passing on to the future generations as well like their ancestors. These arts forms are deep rooted in Keralite culture, which can be understood by tracing back to the rich cultural heritage and history of Kerala. The people of Kerala have a unique sensibility regarding their aesthetic senses, which they all are having pride as well. The rich cultural heritage of Kerala is rooted up not only in the traditional dance and music; rather in paintings, and sculptures as well it is evident.

Kuthiyottam is a traditional ritualistic dance form which is performed in various parts of Kerala, India. This ritual is carried out in the month of Kumbham in the Malayalam calendar. It is performed on the day of Thiruvathira, an important festival in the Hindu Calendar. Apart from its similarity from that of the offensive ritual of 'Human Sacrifice', Kuthiyottam has its own uniqueness. Even though the month of Kumbham showers extreme heat to the atmosphere, people used to celebrate and practise this ritual during this extreme hot climate as well.

In the traditional form of Kuthiyottam that has been practiced for centuries, Boys are selected and trained in advance to perform the ritual. The boys, known as Kuthiyottam performers, undergo a series of physical exercises and rigorous training. They perform a ritualistic dance with intricate footwork and body movements.

Kuthiyottam now-a-days incorporates certain modifications and modernization compared to the traditional form. Boys from different backgrounds and age groups can participate in the Kuthiyottam without prior selection or specific training. The emphasis is more on the cultural and artistic aspects. Participants perform choreographed dance routines accompanied by music. Kuthiyottam generally does not involve body piercing alone, it also aims to promote community participation and inclusiveness during the festival.

It's worth noting that the specific practices and variations of Kuthiyottam may vary across different regions and communities in Kerala. Society plays a significant role in influencing Kuthiyottam through various ways such as, it reflects the religious beliefs, traditions, and values of the community. Society's reverence for the deity and the festival contributes to the continued practice and preservation of Kuthiyottam.

2. Comparing and Contrasting the Practices of Kuthiyottam with the Ancient and Recent Times

There are some minute differences in the ritual of Kuthiyottam practised now from that of the earlier one. The most important practise during the ritual is 'Chooralkuthu'. Earlier, it was practised with canes which are shaped in a particular manner. They were known as 'Polimbukal'. These canes were pierced through the abdomen of the boys who are doing the ritual of Kuthiyottam and hence the name 'Chooral kuthu' or 'Chooral muriyal'. Now-a-days, instead of these canes, threads made of Gold or Silver are being used. Even now, the name has not changed, though the ritual has undergone several changes. In Valiyakulangara, silver thread is being used, whereas in Chettikulangara Golden thread is being used.

As per the information given by Mr. Radhakrishnan Aashan, now-a-days, people belonging to the temple committee will be assigning the Kuthiyottam Aashan's or teams for the Kuthiyottam dance and song performance. The committee members even make a clear-cut statement that they want the Kuthiyottam dance and songs to be performed for a fixed time duration, say one hour. Such statements are forcing the members to perform the Kuthiyottam by making it too short to fit in the said time duration. Even one single song of Kuthiyottam dance will take approximately forty-five to fifty minutes to sing completely. But, because of such attitudes of people towards Kuthiyottam, even the admirers and lovers of the ritual are forced to perform for the materialistic benefits rather than with pure devotion. If people want to enjoy a folk art, then it should be viewed completely. For this, people must sacrifice their valuable time as well. Otherwise, everything will be done just for the sake of its name only.

Also, during the earlier time, most of the parents let their children learn such art forms by staying in the Gurukula's or in their respective teacher's house. But, recently no one are interested in doing so, which ultimately is leading to the destruction of such a folk art which has many relevance in our culture. Everything got changed when people began to run over materialistic things over anything else. Also, even the temple authorities are also not giving much importance to these art forms, except in Chettikulangara. People wanted to enjoy everything in a couple of minutes in the recent times and hence such art forms are not properly performed.

In Chettikulangara temple, while performing the Kuthiyottam steps, some changes can be observed in the Chuvadukal. Many steps are being imitated from other art forms like Kummi, Thiruvaathira, Kolkali, etc. This is a process which was gradually done so as to make it unique and different to attract more audience. Also, earlier there were only four to five people in the music group, including the Aashan. They will be only using Kaitala earlier. Whereas, as a part of the gradual transformation process, the musical instruments such as Jaalara, Ganjira, Naagaswaram, etc. are being used now-a-days as well. These were done only to make the ritual more attractive and unique.

In Chettikulangara (Alappuzha), earlier the children who were undergoing the ritual of Kuthiyottam were given a hat or crown made of gold, called 'Swarnnathoppi'. Now-a-days they wear a hat, but that does not necessarily be made of gold. In Attuakl, the Kuthiyottam processions are carried over during the night time alone and is very simple as far as the Kuthiyottam of other regions are taken into consideration.

Narabali was a ritual which was done earlier based on the motif- for the benefit of society. Even though it was erased from the society because of the societal transformations happened, it still lies in the minds of people as it is being inculcated in them. Such sacrifices were still seen in many art forms. Kuthiyottam is one such an art form, which also has the concept of 'human sacrifice' in it, but only in a mild manner.

The songs of Kuthiyottam are usually very religious and social. Some of the Kuthiyottam songs sung during the performance are old, whereas many others are not. Only their 'thaalavattam' and they way of performance remains the same. These songs have also undergone through many transformations gradually of time and also a part of modernization or social development. Now-a-days, in some temples in between Kuthiyottam, 'Mudi' was brought, which was not practised earlier.

3. Examining the Impact of Kuthiyottam on Society

Kuthiyottam involves active community participation. Society's involvement in organizing and supporting the ritual, including providing financial and logistical assistance, helps sustain the tradition. The enthusiasm and engagement of community members, both young and old, contribute to the vibrancy of Kuthiyottam. The modified form of Kuthiyottam, as mentioned earlier, has been introduced to accommodate broader participation and align with changing societal dynamics.

Historically, Kuthiyottam was a male-exclusive ritual. However, in response to societal changes and demands for gender equality, there have been initiatives to include girls and women in Kuthiyottam performances. Society's recognition of the cultural significance of Kuthiyottam has prompted various preservation and revival efforts. Various Cultural organizations and educational institutions, with the help of local communities have taken several steps in order to promote, and safeguard the traditions existing in Kerala. These efforts are done so as to ensure the existing significance of Kuthiyottam and to enable this art form to be valued in the same manner by the future generations as well.

In short, the society's influence on Kuthiyottam is evident even in its cultural significance, community participation, etc. Also, the evolution of rituals, the efforts from the people for conserving and preserving this ritual, the gender inclusivity, etc. are also coming under society's influence on this particular ritual. As a gradual development arose in society, in order to reflect all these changes, Kuthiyottam maintains its core essence by becoming a

religious as well as cultural ritual. Since this socio-cultural practice of Kuthiyottam is being deeply rooted in Kerala, we can observe a close connection of this in ritual to the socio-cultural field as well. This happens when this ritual tries to provide insights through the local community's cultural beliefs, and ritualistic practices.

Kuthiyottam can be analyzed in various ways from a socio-cultural anthropology perspective. Firstly, it provides an opportunity to scrutinize the role of spirituality as well as religion in shaping the cultural practices that a community owns. The rituals related to the festivals reflects the religious beliefs and devotion that all the participants in every community owns. Secondly, Kuthiyottam culminates the gender dynamics and social roles that exists within these communities. The performances are being carried out by boys. Even though this ritual is done to please a female deity, during ancient days , females were not given opportunities to perform, which later has changed in a small manner. It is offering insights into how the gender is being constructed and how the roles are changing with respect to the contexts of religious festivals and cultural traditions that are practised.

Thirdly, Kuthiyottam can also be analyzed in terms of the study of performance as well as in terms of the anthropology of art. The training and performances of the boys involves numerous artistic expressions; which includes music, dance, martial arts, etc. These performances shed lights on the aesthetic values, artistic techniques, etc. along with the cultural significance of the art forms which are involved. Lastly, Kuthiyottam is in a way providing a path to determine the interplay between tradition and modernity. The festival evolves and adapts to the gradual change in times, which in turn raises several questions regarding the preservation of cultural heritage, the impacts that globalization had, and the parleying of tradition with respect to the contemporary scenario.

In fact, when we study the ritual of Kuthiyottam from a socio-cultural perspective, it helps us to understand the intricate interconnections existing between religion, art, gender, tradition, as well as in the social dynamics within a particular community. It also allows the anthropologists to traverse through the cultural meanings. Also, they will explore the significance of this practice along with its role in framing the identity and societal structure of the community. Kuthiyottam is considered to be a key ritual that is performed during the festival time. It also acts as a symbol of devotion and dedication of the people towards their Mother Goddess, Bhadrakali.

Symbolic anthropology focuses on the study of symbols and their meanings in a particular cultural context. In the case of Kuthiyottam, the dance form has been transformed into a ritualistic practice that indirectly symbolizes the people's devotion and dedication towards their Mother Goddess; who is known by different names like Bhadrakali or Durga. The ritualistic performance of Kuthiyottam serves as a symbolic expression of the religious beliefs, cultural identity, and social cohesion that every performer owns within their community.

The dance form is performed by young boys who are between 8 and 14 years of age. The selection of these boys are done depending on their physical and mental abilities. They are even trained for several months as a preparation for performing in the ritual. These boys will have to perform in a group, which is examined by the elder member of that particular community. The training involves rigorous physical exercises and martial arts practices which resembles Kalaripayattu, that helps to develop their strength and flexibility.

Kuthiyottam can be seen as an experimental practice, as it involves both physical as well as mental preparations through training, that allows the boys to experience a unique connection with the divine. Kuthiyottam is a response to the contradictions created by the modernization in the society. This means it acts as a medium in preserving the traditional culture and customs that happens because of the changes arose in the society and culture. Through Kuthiyottam, the performers are able to learn discipline, and they are empowered to contribute something to their cultural heritage as well.

Performance theory emphasizes the role of rituals and performances in shaping social identities and creating shared meanings. When Kuthiyottam is taken into consideration, it is viewed as a performative act. It buttress the participants' sense of belonging to a particular community and their devotion to the deity. The choreographed movements, costumes, and accompanying music, etc. contribute to their overall performance, which serves as a cultural expression and it even strengthens the collective values and beliefs. Performance theory examines the embodied knowledge and skills that the performers learn throughout their training. It also analyses how these knowledge and skills are being transmitted across generations. It can also have an impact in the role of audience in the ritual; that is, their participation, their emotional experiences and also their spiritual experiences which they received from witnessing the performance.

Kuthiyottam is seen as an auspicious event that is being performed with utmost devotion and dedication. People consider it to be an honour to participate in the ritual. When we take Kerala into consideration, this folk art is an important part of the cultural heritage, which has been practised since hundred to two-hundred years. The performance of Kuthiyottam is considered as a community event. This is because, this ritualistic art form brings together people from different states, communities, religion, etc. The festival is celebrated with great enthusiasm and is a time for people to come together and celebrate their cultural heritage. People belonging to different religious communities used to take part in this ritual. It also promotes a sense of community and mutual trust. Thus, this ritual symbolizes universalism and harmony. Even the feast given during the time of ritual is accessible to every human being irrespective of their class, gender, religion, class, social status, etc.

Ritual theory explores the significance of rituals in social and cultural contexts. The rituals associated with Kuthiyottam, such as the preparation, training of performers, the sequences of events, etc. designs a kind of meaningful experience for the participants as well as the audience. These rituals helps in nurturing the cultural traditions. It also strengthens the societal norms thus by providing a sense of progression and disposition in the community.

Ritual theory examines the significance, function, and meaning of rituals within the contexts of society, religion and culture. Ritual theory emphasizes the symbolic nature of rituals. Kuthiyottam, a form of ritualistic dance, involves young boys who are trained and dressed as warriors. They perform various movements, accompanied by music and chants, to depict scenes from Hindu mythology. Ritual theory can analyze the symbolic meanings associated with the movements, costumes, and narrative elements of Kuthiyottam.

Kuthiyottam is a highly choreographed performance where the participants embody the characters they represent. Ritual theory can explore how the bodily movements, postures, and gestures in Kuthiyottam contribute to the overall ritual experience and the transmission of cultural and religious knowledge. It examines how rituals contribute to the formation of

communal identity and social cohesion. Kuthiyottam is typically performed by a group of boys from the local community, who undergo training together and participate in the festival as a collective. Ritual theory can analyze how Kuthiyottam reinforces a sense of belonging, strengthens social ties, and fosters a shared identity among the participants and the community. It involves understanding the cultural, religious, and social dimensions of every ritual along with its significance within the community, and its wider connections in terms of identity, power, and communication.

Kuthiyottam has also influenced the art and culture of Kerala in other ways. The dance form has inspired the development of various forms of folk art, such as the Theyyam and Poorakkali. These art forms are performed during temple festivals and are characterized by their colourful costumes, masks, and energetic movements. The performance of Kuthiyottam has also had a significant impact on the social fabric of the state. This has helped to promote physical fitness and mental discipline among young boys in the state. There have also been concerns about the use of wooden swords as props during the performance. They have called for the use of safer props during the performance, such as foam swords. In response to these concerns, some organizations have taken steps to address the issues surrounding Kuthiyottam.

The ritual has expanded outside, paving path to the arrival of new sponsors, which ultimately lead to the observance of rituals with different costs indicating every person's financial stability. Also, new groups of performers have introduced different styles in the performance without losing its essence, which ultimately resulted in controversy. Through its continued practice and evolution, Kuthiyottam has served as a means of preserving and transmitting traditional cultural practices and beliefs in Kerala.

Cultural ecology scrutinizes the correlation between a culture and its environment. When we take Kuthiyottam into consideration, the dance form has its origin, which can be traced back to Kerala's martial artistic traditions as well. Also, Kuthiyottam has been evolved into a ritualistic practice due to the region's historical and environmental factors. Also, the Pongala festival occurs every year will be having a particular timing and duration, which may also have cultural and ecological significance, aligning with agricultural cycles or change in the patterns of seasons.

Cultural ecology delves deep into the vigorous relationship that exists between the human cultures and their natural environments. The primary focus of cultural ecology is on analyzing the society's adaptation and interaction with their ecological surroundings. It even includes the ways in which the cultural practices and beliefs are being molded with the influence it gains from the surrounding environment.

The children who performs Kuthiyottam are usually from families which are financially unstable. They have to undergo the training which comprises of a series of rhythmic movements, music, etc. accompanied by some musical instruments like drums. During the day of the ritual, the performers will be dressed up in colourful costumes and will be embellished with ornaments. They will be enacting several episodes by taking reference from the Hindu mythology, especially from the stories related to the Goddess Bhadrakali.

In the contemporary scenario, most of the people, especially the youth are facing so many physical and mental issues. They need some meditations and exercises to get relaxed and to have a peaceful living. During these practise sessions of Kuthiyottam, these people are

becoming healthy physically. They will succeed in developing concentration as well. They will also be learning many languages like Sanskrit, Malayalam, etc. while learning Kuthiyottam. They will be transformed into a multi-talented person by learning music, steps, etc. In the context of cultural ecology, Kuthiyottam can be understood as a cultural practice that strengthens the ecological and social aspects of the community.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the importance of cultural ecology, especially in analyzing and conserving the traditional ritualistic practices like that in Kuthiyottam. Various efforts were put forward to record and conserve such types of cultural practices. This is done by understanding their values in the cultural heritage as well as as in recognizing their importance in preserving the cultural diversity. It also plays a significant role encouraging sustainable relationships with the surroundings or the environment. In short, cultural ecology is a framework meant for analyzing and appreciating the serpentine interaction between cultural practices, ecological dynamics, and social systems, as epitomized by Kuthiyottam and other rituals.

The Kuthiyottam ritual in the Chettikulangara temple holds remarkable sociocultural connections for the community. It has its origin which can be traced back to a history. The incident involved humiliation and retribution. This establishes a sense of identity and pride among the villagers as they bunch up to overcome the humiliation that they faced. They, then tried to contend their cultural significance. The involvement of the Karanavars and the pilgrimage to seek the blessings of Bhagavathi demonstrate a collective effort to uphold their cultural traditions. This unity fosters a sense of belonging and strengthens the collective identity of the community.

The Kuthiyottam ritual itself holds symbolic meaning within the sociocultural context. The ritual thus indicates discipline, devotion, and to preserve and conserve these by being the guardians of legacy. Through participating in the ritual of Kuthiyottam, the community gets strengthened with its cultural heritage and are protecting it for the future generations. The involvement of local leaders, culminates the existing social hierarchies within the community. The leaders play a crucial role in organizing various religious activities. Their influence and status has a major role in maintaining the social order and ensuring the continuance of cultural practices. The ritual fortifies the authority and leadership roles of the elder people, which enables them to harden their position in the society. By seeking the blessings of the Goddess, the community is accentuating its connection to the larger cultural and religious heritage of Kerala.

Kuthiyottam plays a significant role in the lives of the youngsters in the society. When they set foot into adolescence, they will have an immense desire to learn ritualistic art forms and hence they will join the Kuthiyottam groups out of interest. They were not allowed to consume alcohol, smoke and have non-vegetarian food. So, from the practise session onwards, which happens two months prior to the ritual, these people should avoid all these. They must obey the rules which add to their discipline as well. Youths will be diverted to the path of spirituality rather than doing crimes in the society. Adequate amount of exercise and healthy food are given to those people who are learning and practising Kuthiyottam and hence there are less chances of getting any health-related diseases. In the contemporary scenario, in most of the families everyone eats food only when they are hungry. They won't

be eating together. But this ritual paved path for the ritual to unite with the public and to share food with them on these seven days.

To attract more audience, rhythmic music is being added to Kuthiyottam songs, which are known as 'Kummis'. In order to flourish the ritual and to make the future generations perform this ritual they must have a liking towards it and for this purpose such rhythmic music is being used. This is being used in the contemporary scenario. Polivu songs are there, which will help these performers earn money. With the help of this money, they can well-structure the programme. This indicates that people can earn a living from this as well. Sruti and Tala of music play a vital role in performing these songs as well. Devi Sthuthi and Devi Mahatmyam are the only songs which are related to the Goddess that are to be sing in Kuthiyottam. Other songs are usually about the stories of other Gods and Goddesses. During Kummi, several formations can be seen. The performers used to do the 'chuvadukal' by forming the shape of squares, circles, etc. as mentioned by Pradeep and Pramod Aashans.

While checking the social media pages regarding the Kuthiyottam group, 'Shailanandini Kuthiyotta Samithi', a viral video shared by Actor Salim Kumar is seen in which a small girl of three to four years of age singing the song lyrics of this Samithi in a marvellous manner. This indicates that Kuthiyottam songs even have the power to influence a little girl's mind and heart because of its quality of soothing the five senses. Even many mothers of small kids used to say that the children used to eat their lunch only after listening to some of the contemporary rhythms of these songs. This was told by Rajan, a villager of Chettikulangara. This symbolizes that even small children are also, in a way or the other connected to this ritual.

Earlier people used to live as large joint families. Later it got separated and small families were formed. To reunite with the members of these small families and to enjoy togetherness with friends as well who belongs to different religion and caste, these types of religious practices are being performed. To learn Kuthiyottam as well so many people belonging to different religion and caste used to visit the Aashans. This helps in establishing harmony, unity and equality in the minds of individuals.

In older times, there were many schooling ways in which students learn. One among was that these children will go and stay in the teacher's home and will study. Here, in these seven days procedures, these children will be staying away from their parents and homes like those in earlier times. This brings them closer to the teachers and they learn to respect and value them. Even if an Aashan punishes a student, it won't be a problem for the student and his parents. They will be more disciplined. The organizer and his family will be treating children who are performing this ritual as their own children. This symbolizes harmony and unity in the society.

As per the details provided by Mr. Pradeep and Mr. Pramod Aashans from Chettikulangara, a Christian family is related to the Chettikulangara temple. Hence, these people also have access to the temple and Kuthiyottam ritual as well. Even the Kuthiyottam learners belong to all religion and classes. As per the information given by Mr Vasudeva Kaimal Aashan, in Valiyakulangra temple as well, a Muslim family is having a connection and hence during the time of rituals all the members from the fragmented family will offer a bushel full of grains to the temple and participate in Kuthiyottam. This is an example of harmony and universal brotherhood.

In the modern days, even the families who organize Kuthiyottam make some conditions regarding the Aashans to perform Kuthiyottam, musicians, etc. These people even use speakers, microphones, DJ lighting's etc. while organizing a Kuthiyottam in their houses, which are not found in the early practise of Kuthiyottam. Even though the performers and the Aashans differ in opinions regarding such things adding to this folk art, they cannot react. They were being forced to obey these organizers in such circumstances. This is done only based on one purpose, that is., to make the public understand that the organizer is so rich. This shows the public's influence on the people who do Kuthiyottam and the ritual as well. Earlier, art used to get established with the support of religion.

Earlier the Aashan and the children used to do these 'chuvadukal' by wearing a towel (Chuttithorthu). But now-a-days, they wear double layered dhoti and banian cloth since the performers includes boys as well who were grown-ups and hence to cover their body, they are using this. This was a change brought recently. Apart from such small changes happened, Kuthiyottam is still observed in the same manner as it was observed before. Some of these changes made by the contemporary Kuthiyottam Aashan's were acceptable for half portion of the society. Whereas another half is opposing these as they believe that rituals must be practised and performed as per the traditional method or else its essence will be lost.

Earlier, a kalari was there to teach Kuthiyottam in Valiyakulangara as per the information given by Mr. Vasudeva Kaimal Aashan. Now-a-days, it is not property used. Earlier, usually children were fascinated to this ritual after watching the steps from their own parents, who are Kuthiyottam practitioners. The interested people, who were available here went in search of jobs to other countries and states and hence nobody is there to teach, practise and perform Kuthiyottam.

4. Conclusion

Over the years, societal changes and influences have led to the evolution of Kuthiyottam. Modernization, urbanization, and the impact of globalization have influenced the performance of Kuthiyottam. Due to modernization, the ritual of Kuthiyottam witnessed several changes, even though every Aashan try to protect the essence of the ritual. When urbanization shattered the unity among families, communities and people, this ritual sticks on to its sole aim of bringing unity and harmony among people amidst all the circumstances. People are celebrating universal brotherhood by enjoying and participating in this ritual. With symbolic anthropology, it is understood that the symbols used in Kuthiyottam are symbolically representing their devotion to the Goddess Bhadrakali.

The young generation of Kerala enjoys many positive progress due to their participation in the ritual. They will be taken away from the path of wrong doings. They will maintain a balanced diet and have a healthy body as well as a healthy mind. This ritual strengthens the societal relationships and also it can be noted that the rituals and performances associated with Kuthiyottam, highlight the intricate relationship between the natural environment, human culture, and religious beliefs. This gives more emphasis to the theory of cultural ecology.

Studying this ritual of Kuthiyottam involves mastering various artistic expressions, dance and music forms, martial arts, etc. which gives a great emphasis on the artistic expression and techniques. Finally, a transformation or shift in the attitudes of society can be seen by including female participants for singing in the ritual of Kuthiyottam. This is evident even

from the use of performance theory as well. This shift reflects the evolving attitudes towards the gender roles and inclusivity within society.

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