



# Kuthiyottam-A South Indian Ritualistic Performance: Cultural Uniqueness and Practice

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Kuthiyottam is a ritualistic folkdance form performed as an offering during the festive seasons in Devi temples, especially in the southern parts of Kerala (A southern Indian State). The most important Kuthiyottam performance is organized at the festival of Chettikulangara Bhagavathy Temple in Alappuzha. This folkart form, similar to *nara bhali* or human sacrifice, is usually held during the month of Kumbham in accordance with the Malayalam calendar. This is also organized in Harippad, Kayamkulam, Ochira, Mavelikkara, Chengannur and Karunagappalli besides Chettikulangara.

Kuthiyottam is an important event also in the temples of Valiyakulangara, Panayannarkkavu, Ramapuram, Pazhaveedu, Shastamkotta, Muthukulam, Karuvattu, Vettati, Sharkkara, Kadaykkal and Attukaal. It is also conducted as a new ritual at the Devi temples of Alappuzha, Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam districts and is practiced in the Devi Temples in Kottayam, Idukki and Ernakulam districts as an art form.

The art forms let the devotees and general public experience the unwritten past, culture and history of rituals and they are called as performing arts. Kuthiyottam is one of Kerala's most well-known folkart forms. It is a work of art in which one can observe the blending of life and culture of the people of central Kerala with no prejudice based on caste or faith. Sincere dedication to art and life, spiritual practices and tasks undertaken by the predecessors of a generation of people for the success of this art form are reflected in its practice. It is an event in which people from the society gather on the stage to celebrate. One can observe the entire community praying together for the village to prosper and be free of diseases. It is an evolving art form, retaining its cultural identity.

## Genesis and Its Mythology

Bhadrakali is the supreme deity in Kuthiyottam. The mother Goddess of fertility is the Goddess of disease here. The offering in the form of Kuthiyottam is made by a large community to prevent them from suffering from contagious diseases such as smallpox and the concept is that the Bhagavati is pleased with the sacrifice of children. Its rituals are similar to those of human sacrifice. In the earliest forms of practice, people used to appease the Goddess of Disease by the sacrifice of humans with their blood. So, devotees offer blood to the Devi in this ritual.

Human sacrifice was prevalent in certain tribal groups just like sacrifice was a significant ritual in most religions around the world. And, it was carried out as part of devotion. People regarded the God of Prosperity and Fertility as their Mother. When there was a harvest, people observed the habit of offering sacrifice to God and they felt that it was the only way to keep the earth productive. In line with this practice, it was performed and celebrated on the temple premises after the harvest.

## **Etymology**

The name, Kuthiyottam, is derived from two verbs: “kuthuka” meaning “to pierce” and “oduka” meaning “to go”. “Kuttuka” refers to inscribing of the children's abdomens with a nearly two-meter-long thin wire made from silver or gold. “Ottam” is a travel-related word; from the location, where the kid is pierced, the child is taken in a procession to the temple. Kuthiyottam is also called as “Ottakuthiyottam” or “Erattakuthiyottam”, depending on the number of devotees and their offering of children for this ritual. This practice is known as “Ottakuthiyottam” in case one child is offered and “Erattakuthiyottam” when two, even though very often more than two children are assigned for this.

## **Rules and Practice**

Children interested in participating in Kuthiyottam begin its practice under the supervision of their aasan (teacher/trainer). Their practice is based on the movements and steps in accordance with those of Kalari (a martial art practice, especially in north Kerala). Father of the family offering the children for this performance takes them to live in his house for a chaste life for a month before the ritual. Worship of Devi and chanting of bhajans take place as part of the children's life during this period. An instructor (aasan) would teach the youngsters the steps for performing it daily. Musical instruments, particularly “Chenda”(drums), “Kurunkuzhal” (flute), and “Ilattalam” (cymbals) are required during the training time.

A devotee offering Kuthiyottam begins by decorating his house with an awning and then prepares the shrine by placing a sword on a red pedestal as the first step. The floor of the shrine is anointed with the cow dung and purified. The shrine is then decorated with the leaves of banyan, mango, courgette flower petals and coconut fronds. Red garland and tender coconut flowers in the nirapara (rice vessel) are kept on the pedestal. This decoration is done every evening till the day of performance without fail and new flowers are used daily. The singers will sit beside the left side of the shrine, where the power of Devi is possessed. This elaborate function is only seen in the district of Alappuzha. In Thiruvananthapuram district, the children are offered to the temple as part of the ritual.

The performance of Kuthiyottam may be presented in two ways. A five-day training period is the first phase. The sixth day is a day of rest, during which the children are required to shave their heads and bathe. After that, there is a massive feast. On the seventh day, the rituals begin with the children being placed in front of the shrine and their skin being removed from their abdomen and a cane is laced parallel through the skin. With the accompaniment of percussion instruments, the pierced children are escorted to the temple ground. The absorbing sounds of panchavadyam (orchestra of five instruments), nadaswaram, royal umbrellas and kettukazhcha (decorations) accompany the parade. When they reach the temple, they walk around the deity three times and step upon the main altar of the Goddess rhythmically, pulling the pierced cane and offering it to the Goddess. In the districts of Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram, the song and dance last for one day.

Different types of ceremonies are organized in temples in connection with the Kuthiyottam. It is one of Chettikulangara Amma's favourite offerings, and the celebration lasts seven days. There is an elaborate ritualistic tradition in this temple.

The first step is to recruit a teacher (guru) to oversee Kuthiyottam's ceremonies and activities. Then the devotee offering it must approach him on giving him a Dakshina (present) and inviting him to the

house, where the event is held, and entrust him with all responsibility. The devotee's family should next present their offerings to their forefathers as well as the deity who protect their family (taravaatu).

### **Construction of an Awning**

The construction of an awning is one of the important offerings of Kuthiyottam. It is made according to the measurement of length and breadth of 16\*8, 9\*16, and 15\*16. The teacher (guru) will light the lamp and decorate Lord Ganesha. Then, the ceremony will start after the pooja or worship of the guru. The fertile areca palm is cut and fashioned and the kodiyaattam (hosting the flag) is done after this. Banyan, mango and betel leaves as well as fresh turmeric and a garland of coconut fronds, adorn the areca palm.

The shrine should be maintained inside the awning at the south-west corner of the aula (mandapam). The deity facing to the east is ideal. The aula should be built using a 2\*10 measurement for length and width. Devi is consecrated inside the aula. Banyan, mango, and betel leaves, as well as orange coconuts, are used to embellish the aula. Purification and anointing with cow dung are required for the floor. On the aula, the image of the Devi should be kept on a jack wood pedestal. The cow dung cake should be securely attached to the pedestal.

### **Lighting of Lamp**

The lamps should be lit in the awning at the time fixed by the teacher (guru). And they should be used according to the odd numbers, such as one, three, five, seven, nine, and eleven. In the presence of the five components of nature and cosmic, known as 'panchabhootas,' a bhadraadeepam (a lamp with five wicks) is lit. The lights are lit in a specific order with the three lamps representing Ganapati, Devi and Guru, followed by the Nagas, Forefathers, and Ashtadikpalas (the guardian of eight directions). They should also provide Nirapara (rice vessel) and Niranazhi (Measuring Cup), where aval (beaten rice), grapes, sugar candy, tender coconut, fresh coconut chunks and unsalted rice ada should be prepared for lord Ganesha. An incandescent stick, camphor, sandalwood paste, areca catechu flower, garlands, spices, flowers, and pooja containers should all be present. A coconut is placed on a pedestal, which is covered with a silk cloth above the flawless betel leaf, which is on the broken brown rice. Next to the ornamented pedestal, the sword should be placed. This ceremony should be performed with the "Nanthakam" sword.

### **The Children of Kuthiyottam**

Young boys between eight and twelve are selected for Kuthiyottam. The chosen youngsters should not be afflicted with any disease or be disabled in any way. They must be members of the family, organizing Kuthiyottam and from the place, where the ceremony is performed or sons of their family members, or, they may be even adopted. On being laced with the cane, if the cane is broken, those children will not be chosen again for Kuthiyottam because they are considered inauspicious by the community. It is believed that their vigour will be lost following the sacrifice. So, in almost every Kuthiyottam in Chettikulangara, people offer adopted children. For this, a lot of money is spent. Certain others give their children as an offering.

The adopted children's parents leave their children in the respective dwellings of the family, where the rituals are performed on the day of Shivaratri, early in the morning. After that, their teacher (guru), the children for Kuthiyottam and devotees making the offering, arrive at the Devi temple. Once being bathed in the temple pond and clothed in white thorthu (towel), they make dharsan at the Devi's sanctum sanctorum. Then, they offer dakshina to the chief priest and garland him. The instructor (guru) then breaks the coconut in front of Ganesh and performs the rites, while keeping the children and family together. They are then instructed to perform a temple circumambulation and seek the blessings of other minor deities. The lads will give their parents dakshina and the devotee offering the Kuthiyottam, will take the children away from them. The children are then taken to the devotee's house who conducts the ceremony. After this, the children are taken to the temple grounds only on Kuthiyottam's Bharani day.

### **Polivu**

There is a particular ritual called 'polivu' on Revathy day. Kuthiyottam becomes part of a community through this. On the first day of the Kuthiyottam, devotees and their family give their offerings to Polivu in accordance with their wealth. A silk cloth is laid in front of Devi's shrine to keep the polivu offerings safe. Everyone gives their offerings in the polivu in front of the community. At the Polivu plateau, the chief devotee offers clothes and money first. Three banana leaves are laid in front of the Devi shrine after the Polivu ceremony. Each leaf is offered with money. The first leaf is dedicated to ChettikulangaraBhagavathi, the second to the village's other smaller temples and the third to the dharma deities. Apart from that, no donations should be collected for the conduct of Kuthiyottam.

### **Hair Cutting**

On the day of rest occurring on Aswathy, the children of Kuthiyottam cut their hair, which is known as 'Kothuvettu.' The kothuvettu ritual should be arranged so that it is on the left side of the awning outside and does not face the Devi's shrine. The boys are expected to sit on a mat made of raw coconut leaf and then to stand on a banyan leaf. Then, water mixed with turmeric and neem leaves is poured into their bodies slowly and steadily (daara).

They put on areca catechu sandals after their bath and are led to the kuthiyottam temple aula (mandapam) without touching anyone. Then the devotee and the children are seated on a white piece of cloth and they keep singing Devi's devotional hymns till dawn.

### **Churalmuriyal**

The skin on either sides of the child's belly is laced with one half of a split cane. Golden and silver threads are used for this. Before piercing the needle into the body, the area will be thoroughly rubbed with sacred ash. After the piercing, the procession will begin with the accompaniment of singing and dancing in the temple grounds. Turmeric water is sprinkled often. The person who conducts the ceremony should be present when the needle is removed. The Dakshina is only awarded to the teacher (guru) after the cane or chooral has been removed. Children are given banana, milk and tender coconut. No rice should be fed to them. The teacher (guru) removes the chooral only after the devotee and the child circumambulate the temple. The removed chooral is kept in the copper plate placed in the temple and the children are taken for a bath. Then they are gifted with new clothes and a grand feast is given to them before they leave the place.

### **Netturpetti**

The presence of Netturpetti is one of the main attractions in the procession in Kuthiyottam. It is carried by the devotee or the person he assigns to do it. Netturpetti consists of piercing canes and threads to remove them, clothing and other accessories, a towel and dothis to wear after the canes are removed, a money pouch for temple offerings and some betel leaves. In the past, the landlords would send a steward to transport these garments from the royal palace to the home of the person who would administer the ritual and then the steward would lock the box and walk to the temple. Carrying Netturpetti became a ritual later on.

### **Believes**

Kuthiyottam is a devotional offering made by favoured worshippers to appease the deity (devata). There is a prevalent notion that if they do not observe it, the wrath of devi will be upon them and the family itself will face mortal diseases like small pox. One of the most essential rituals is chooralkuthu (piercing). The concept that children are being sacrificed to Devis persists in the minds of the people. The children of Alappuzha district are prepared for Kuthiyottam ritual by spending enormous sums of money to buy them for adoption. People consider, children who perform the piercing, will be inauspicious. In Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram districts, the parents sacrifice their own children for the Kuthiyottam rituals. They have the belief that they are offering their children as servants to Devi.

In the seven long Kuthiyottam ritual days, the sixth day is celebrated with a feast. There will not be any discrimination of caste and creed during the feast. The belief is that ignoring some people may lead to the wrath of Devi.

### **Relation with Other Art Forms**

Kuthiyottam is also related with other folk art forms and their performance in Kerala. One can see that, both in Kuthiyottam and Padayani, the procession starts from one temple and ends in another temple. In these two, folk songs are sung during the procession. The painted moles (facial makeup) seen in the face of “theyyam” are also done in the face and body of the children who perform Kuthiyottam rituals. The martial steps seen in “Kalari” appear in the Kuthiyottam’s dance. There is a similarity in the dance form of “Kuravar”, “Kali” and “Parichamuttu” with the dance form of Kuthiyottam. Adapted to various aspects of cultural diversities from Kerala, Kuthiyottam has become a major ritual folk art.

### **Kuthirachuvattil Kanji (rice porridge)**

During the last day of Kuthiyottam, rice porridge (Kanji: used to be food as breakfast for a long time for Malayalis) is served as an offering for the people who make the huge horse-like or “kaavadi”. This porridge is known by “kuthirachuvattil kanji”. The head of the house should directly invite the artists who make the horse. During the feast, they arrive by rhythmically clapping and singing devotional songs of Devi. They arrive at the ancestral home (taravaadu) to take the porridge. The neighbours and their family members will also attend the function. For porridge, horse-gram puzhukk, is an important side dish. It is a grand meal, in which bananas, pappads, minor salted side dishes, are also served along with rice flakes (avil).

This is a cultural festival of the people at large fostering love and unity in them. This festival gathering cuts across all the barriers of caste and creed, highlighting the unity of the people.

### **Human Sacrifice**

Historical documents authenticate that human sacrifice (children were sacrificed) was prevalent in several parts of India in order to get relief from smallpox. The belief is that children are sacrificed to Kaali Devi. Some rituals in Kuthiyottam bear a striking resemblance to human sacrifices. Consecrating the sword on a pedestal, as the first step of a series of rituals, points out human sacrifice. It is placed on a piece of thick red silk cloth. The turmeric and limestone mixture, which is red in colour, is used to sprinkle on the wounds. This strengthens the resemblance with human sacrifice.

### **Apparels and Ornaments**

The boys meant to perform Kuthiyottam are decked with garlands of crimson flowers. In the case of adorning, there are minor local differences. Children in Alappuzha district apply white spots on their faces with rice flour for facial make-up and wear a golden crown on their heads. A bath towel is wrapped around their waist and a plantain leaf is kept above it with a hip chain wrapped around. There are armlet and anklet for each one. In Thiruvananthapuram, however, the children are dressed like Lord Krishna with peacock feather crowns on their heads and spots on their faces.

There is a question answer session in the Kuthiyottam songs, which are both entertaining and informative for the people around. The songs are significant for their rhythm and sonorous voice and with several refrains.

## Conclusion

Kuthiyottam is an art festival cutting across all boundaries of caste and creed and unite the people. It is not only a ritual to eradicate evil forces but also to usher in prosperity to the community. One may find a sense of equality in its rituals. This is also considered as a gathering of a village for the worship of mother. It is a rare and unique folk dance art form. It is similar to the human sacrifice and is celebrated during the hot summer month of Kumbha. Starting from Kuthiyottam, continuing in Kettukazhcah, it is concluded in Kuthirachuvattile kanji. It is significant because it fosters unity and love among people. And, they are convinced of the reward of prosperity as the blessings of Chettikulangara Devi. Also, one can see a surplus of farm produces throughout the rituals in the form of banyan and mango leaves, vanilla, raw turmeric, nirapara (measuring vessel filled with grains), niranazhi (measuring cup) and sesame seeds. This is a hearty sign pointing out the association between humans and nature.

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