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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THOLPAVAKOOTHU: PERFORMING RITUAL THROUGH SHADOW PUPPETRY

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ABSTRACT

Tholpavakoothu is a shadow puppetry performed predominantly in the *Bhadrakali* temples of Kerala. This ritualistic performance narrates stories from the *Ramayana* using leather puppets against an illuminated screen. This paper seeks to examine how *Tholpavakoothu*'s ritualistic practices and norms influence its performance. The paper argues that the ritualistic nature of *Tholpavakoothu* is constituted not merely through overt religious practices but also through its spatial arrangements, lighting techniques, and performing objects, which function as integral components of the ritual enactment. This qualitative study reveals that the performative elements and practices of *Tholpavakoothu* are subsumed in the ritualistic *Bhadrakali* worship rather than existing as autonomous theatrical elements.

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INTRODUCTION

Tholpavakoothu is a shadow puppet play performed in Kerala. The term *Tholpavakoothu* is a portmanteau word which comprises of *thol* (leather), *pava*(puppet) and *koothu*(play) meaning leather puppet play. This tradition draws upon the *Kamba Ramayanam*[1], narrating episodes from the life of *Rama* through the manipulation of leather puppets against an illuminated screen. These performances are staged in lieu of worship at *Bhadrakali*[2] temples located in Palakkad in Kerala. This art tradition is performed by practitioners belonging to the *pulavar* community and is passed across generations. The performers of *Tholpavakoothu* are well versed in Ramayana, Sanskrit and classic texts. *Tholpavakoothu* is staged during festivals at *Bhadrakali* temples in Kerala. This art is tied to the myth of *Bhadrakali,* who is engaged in a battle with *Darika*[3] when *Rama* defeated *Ravana. Bhadrakali* expresses her desire to listen to *Ramayana* and *Tholpavakoothu* is rendered on stage in her honour. Richard Schechner states that, "sacred rituals are those associated with expressing or enacting religious beliefs. It is assumed that religious belief systems involve communicating with praying or otherwise appealing to supernatural force".(1) *Tholpavakoothu* is neither a prayer nor an appeal to the deity. This performance is staged to fulfil the wishes of *Bhagawathi*[4] and is intertwined with the temple worship. "Performance itself is framed by ceremonial and ritual observances, singing of benedictory songs, offerings made by the Gods, concluding ritualistic procedures and singing of verse".(2) Thus, *Tholpavakoothu* functions as both a ritual and performance and contesting the rigid boundaries that separate the two. The ritualistic nature of *Tholpavakoothu* implies that the material objects and elements of the performance cannot be solely viewed as theatrical components and needs to be placed in a ritualistic context. The stage, illuminated screen, oil lamps, and leather puppets are generally identifiable as components of theatrical production. Yet their use within the temple context is shaped by religious conventions. Thus, this paper intends to examine how ritual practices and conventions influence the performative organization of *Tholpavakoothu.*

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach employing secondary sources which includes published

[1] Kamba Ramayanam is a version of Ramayana written by Tamil poet Kambar in twelfth century.
[2] Bhadrakali is a goddess worshipped in Kerala. She is a ferocious form of Shakthi and is a protector of good.
[3] Darika is an asura who wreaked havoc on earth. He was granted a boon by Brahma by which he can only be killed by a woman. Bhadrakali was created to kill Darika.

[4] Bhagawathi means Goddess.

accounts and descriptions on *Tholpavakoothu* and existing scholarship alongside live performances. The study does not include interviews with practitioners, or an independently assembled audiovisual corpus which constitutes the major limitations of the study.

Ritualistic Context of Tholpavakoothu: The ritualistic practice of *Tholpavakoothu* is centred around *Bhadrakali* worship. The performance is held at *Bhadrakali* temples in Kerala reinforcing the myth as it was solely intended for the deity as its audience. This emphasises that *Tholpavakoothu* is not devised for a conventional audience but a divine entity. This transforms the whole performance into a ritualistic event and can no longer be viewed only through the lens of a theatrical tradition. The ritual obligation influences every element of this tradition from its setting, puppets, lighting and material objects. The rituals involved in *Tholpavakoothu* is minimal. Before each performance, the head puppeteer is blessed by the *vellichappadu*[5] of the temple and asks the puppeteer to narrate the story of Ramayana. *Vellichappadu* symbolises the *Bhagawathi* of the temple and his presence at *Tholpavakoothu* can be called a sacred consent. The ritualistic aspect involved in *Tholpavakoothu* has aided in its survival over the years. This holds true for many traditional art forms in India which persists because it is a temple art and the religious identity has played a role in its preservation. Sahil Singh explains this as, "the ritual aspect of puppetry contains within it the very heart of the issues concerning the future of shadow puppetry in India, material as well as spiritual survival for performers as they practise their art; and the significance audience ascribe to witnessing a performance" (3 p.156).The worship of *Bhadrakali* has led to the preservation of many ritualistic art forms such as *Theyyam, Mudiyettu, Padayani, Theeyattam* etc. These folk and traditional arts survived the onslaught of mainstream entertainment because of the ritualistic notion attached to it.

Tholpavakoothu is staged at the *koothumadoms* inside the temples. *Koothumadoms* are permanent structures built especially for *Tholpavakoothu*. It is a hollow one storey structure with traditional tiled roof. The elevated stage is enclosed by walls on three sides with the frontal wall missing, reminiscent of archaic box shaped puppetry devices. A white muslin cloth is pulled across the stage which will function as the screen for shadow play. The lower portion of the curtain is in black to create the contrast between light and dark. There are thin wooden planks behind the curtain where lighted earthen lamps are placed. They use the natural lighting to develop clear shadows on the screen. The puppets are placed between the screen and the wooden planks. However, the *koothumadom* is not merely a neutral structure selected for technical convenience. Its customary location within the temple environment connects the theatrical activity to the religious setting in which the performance takes place. The spatial arrangement and the setting are designed to appease the deity of the temple and not to maximise the viewing pleasure of the conventional human audience. The performance space thus illustrates the relationship between theatrical functionality and religious organisation. The performing objects involved in *Tholpavakoothu* is the most significant part of the performance. Myra Weiger describes puppet as, "the essence or magnification of a character and not a scaled-down version of a person or animal. The puppet lives in imagination" (4 p.56). The puppets for the *Tholpavakoothu* are created by the performers using deer skin. They use natural colours to prepare the puppets. Each puppet is built according to the proportion of a man. The puppets have eyes and is adorned with ornaments depending upon the characters. Each character requires puppets in three positions such as sitting, standing and walking or fighting as per the character. These puppets are punctured with holes so that light filters through it casting beautiful shadows on screens. Inge Orr explains the movement of puppets as, "shadow puppets are flat and transparent leather or paper cut-outs, fastened to one supporting stick and manipulated by at least two other thin sticks or rods" (5 p. 69). The characters in Ramayana are not traditional figures, they are depicted as polymelic.[6] This requires a lot of finesse as the characters need a lot of fine detailing. One such figure is Brahma, his four heads and the Vedas could be discerned even when it was placed behind the curtain. The movement of puppets across the screen is beautifully characterised in *Tholpavakoothu*. The portrayal of Vishnu rousing from his yoga nidra is similar to a man waking up from his sleep. They depict a disoriented Vishnu solely through the movement of the puppet. *Tholpavakoothu* requires three hundred puppets for a single performance. The puppets can be stored for about hundred or one fifty years. Inge Orr makes certain observation about the art of puppet making which is as follows:

The South Indian and Indonesian shadow puppets are ritually created. They are cut out according to traditional rules, whereby heads and facial features are incised last, thus ritually giving life to the puppet. This according to Dutch W.H Ressers , goes back to animistic ritual, whereby the ancestors were brought back to life by means of shadows for the purpose of initiating the youth. (5. p.74). At the beginning of each performance, the performers invoke the blessings of Lord Ganesha. This invocation includes seeking the prayers of their ancestors or gurus. Orr's observation parallels the practice in *Tholpavakoothu*. The puppets represent deities from Ramayana and so, these tangible material objects gain sacred relevance when it is placed in this setting. The puppets therefore operate at the intersection of material technique, narrative representation, and ritual context.

Lighting plays a crucial role in the production of *Tholpavakoothu.* Oil lamps are used to create the shadows on screens. The positioning of lamp, screen and manipulation of the puppet results in the creation of visible shadows on screen. However, the role of lighting is not just technical. The act of lighting lamps in the temple is a form of worship called *deepaaradhana* and is carried out in the evenings. Here, the act of lighting lamps in a temple setting makes this a ritualistic act and cannot be viewed only as process of theatrical production. Lighting is consequently an example of how the theatrical procedures of *Tholpavakoothu* may be incorporated into the enactment of ritual rather than functioning as activities entirely separate from it. *Tholpavakoothu* is not performed for a specific audience. They perform it out of their duty and belief. The whole performance's purpose is to appease the deity. This is evident in *Tholpavakoothu* which is staged in the early hours of the morning and has no audience to view the performance.

[5] Vellichappadu refers to the oracle of the temple. They act as a bridge between the deity and the devotees.

[6] Polymelic refers to the presence of multiple limbs attached to the human body. It is also used in conjunction with mythology.

The play is staged for an imagined audience rather than a real audience. The puppeteer hangs a *thookuvillakku*[7] in front of the koothumadom, which symbolises *Bhagawathi.* The performers are not concerned about the lack of audience since they perform it for the *Bhagawathi* inside the temple. Sahil Singh discusses this as follows:

The puppeteers would not perform unless they believed there was the palpable presence of the goddess surrounding the koothumadom, witnessing the play, and dire consequences would follow, if they were to compromise on their performance. (3 p.164). *Tholpavakoothu* is an art form which cannot be reduced to the label of performance nor a ritual. It contests certain ideals of performance such as an audience. It transcends the notion of performance through its spectacle. Stuart Blackburn concludes that," the medium of shadow puppetry , with its ventriloquism, shadows and invisible performers, so completely severed the link between the audience that these plays were not performances at all" (6 p.63).

Tholpavakoothu demonstrates a close relationship between theatrical practice and religious convention. Its performance depends upon the manipulation of leather puppets, the projection of shadows, and the organization of a designated theatrical space. However, the whole process of theatrical production is embedded in the *Bhadrakali* worship. *Koothumadoms* are situated within a temple's ritual setting. Similarly, lighting performs a dual function as it enables the projection of images while it symbolises a sacred ritual within a temple setting.

The leather puppets facilitate the visual narration of the *Ramayana*, thereby contributing to the performance through which the tradition fulfils its customary ritual obligations. These elements illustrate how the technical and aesthetic dimensions of *Tholpavakoothu* are integrated into its ritual enactment.

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[7] Thookuvilakku is an oil lamp which has a long chain with a hook which can be hung.