Over-Ritualization of Performance

Western Discourses on Kutiyattam

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1. Kalamandalam Rama Chakyar as the Vidushaka in a performance of Bhagavadajjukiyam at the Kerala Kalamandalam, 31 July 2002. (Photo by Mundoli Narayanan)
It is a moot point that the early work on the connections between ritual and performance, led by the groundbreaking work of Victor Turner, Arnold Van Gennep, and others, explored a very compelling area of study. By investigating such phenomena and features as “liminality,” “communitas,” and the passage from one state to the other, they not only uncovered the links between the two but were also able to throw light on such aspects of performance as theatrical framing, actor transformation, audience participation, actor-audience interaction, and so on.

However, the unfortunate fact is that among the later adherents to ritual/performance studies, there has developed a tendency when it comes to studies of non-Western theatres—especially traditional Asian theatres—to overemphasize the importance of ritual in performance. Sometimes this is done even to the exclusion of other aspects that are equally or more vital to the understanding of performance. This inclination has also led some to explain away many features of performance by interpreting them as rituals, while obviously ignoring their value as techniques or conventions of theatre. While the manifestations of this tendency toward over-ritualization can be seen in studies of a variety of Asian forms such as nōgaku, bunraku, and kagura of Japan, kathakali of India, Balinese dances, and others, the focus here is only on the studies of kutiyattam, from Kerala in southwestern India.

Recently recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” (2001), kutiyattam is the only surviving form of Sanskrit theatre, and with a recorded history of more than 10 centuries\(^1\) it is easily the oldest existing performance form in India. Traditionally performed in kuttampalams, the temple theatres of Kerala, kutiyattam has a repertoire of Sanskrit plays. Its conventional style of performance is marked by a blend of emblematic costumes and makeup, symbolic gestures, stylized movements and facial expressions, and a method of dialogue rendition that resembles Vedic chants. There is no scenery, very few props, and the only source of light is a single bell-metal lamp with three wicks burning. The length and pace of performance is phenomenal: with the pre-play and post-play rituals, exposition of the pre-story, and the detailed interpretative enactment of the text, a full production of a play could take months to complete. Therefore, in actual practice, only individual acts of plays are performed, which last from five to ten nights (see Narayanan 2005).

It is quite natural that any person approaching kutiyattam for the first time will find two of its most manifest features striking: the setting, as it is performed in theatres connected to Hindu temples; and its pre-play and post-play rituals. In one sense it is then inevitable that initially most Western studies of kutiyattam would focus primarily on these two related features. However, instead of looking at other significant performance elements on their own terms for a more comprehensive analysis of the form, most of these studies take these two features as defining characteristics of kutiyattam, implicitly assuming it to be totally religious and ritualistic in nature. Though examples of the above propensity are indeed plenty and comprise a continuous and consistent strand through most of these studies, I will address only an exemplary few.

Basing his arguments on the fact that kutiyattam is performed in temple theatres, Bruce Sullivan writes:

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\(^1\) The earliest verifiable record is that of King Kulasekhara Varman, who ruled Mahodayapuram (a kingdom near present-day Kodungallur, in central Kerala) in the 10th century C.E., which credits him with having written two plays, Subhadra Dhananjayam and Tapatisamvaranam, and also having reformed kutiyattam (see Raja 1974:1).

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The theatre is situated within the temple compound so that, with the doors to the temple’s main image open during performances, God in iconic form is included in its audience. Such a performance could be a manifestation of divinity and the catalyst for a religious experience for the audience. The vivid depiction onstage of the deity’s triumph over evil and establishment of order in the world provides the devotees with an experience of catharsis that is satisfying both in an aesthetic and a religious sense. (1997:100–01)

At a later point in the same essay, Sullivan goes even further and situates the religious aspect of the plays in their very content, the literary dramas themselves:

Witnessing Sanskrit dramas in the kutiyattam style has deep religious significance in part because of the content of the dramas enacted. Unlike the classical dramas composed by Kalidasa, Sudraka, and most other known playwrights of ancient India, the most frequently performed dramas in the kutiyattam tradition (including plays attributed to Bhasa, Kulasekahara Varman, and Saktibhadra) have more obviously religious themes and moments of devotional significance. (1997:101–02)

To lend further credence to his argument that devotion plays a major role in the appreciation of kutiyattam, Sullivan also links it to the Hindu Vaishnavee bhakti (devotional) movement:

An audience member’s purpose in viewing a classical Sanskrit drama is to experience the rasa that the artwork can facilitate. [...]. The aesthetic theory of rasa took on religious as well as aesthetic significance in the Vaishnava bhakti context, the devotee learning to relish the emotionally satisfying experience of communion with God. The Gosvami theologians reinterpreted rasa, utilizing the terminology of this aesthetic theory but in important ways changing its purpose. Krishna became the only hero (nayaka) and his life story the only play [...]. Rupa Gosvami wrote that the attainment of rasa through devotion to Krishna was equivalent to moksha (liberation from rebirth) [...]. This religio-aesthetic theory underlies the tradition of kutiyattam, and audience members attend enactments as participants in a devotional performance with the expectation of religious experience. (1997:101)

Seeking to draw a parallel with the temple rituals conducted by priests, Farley Richmond asserts: “Kutiyattam has all the earmarks of an important ritual event [...]. Kutiyattam is called chak-shushayagna (a visual sacrifice), and like the sacrifices performed by the temple priests, it is also done in honor of the temple’s chief deity” (1978:28–29). Furthermore, on the basis that kutiyattam employs gestures seemingly similar to the ones used in Vedic sacrifices, Richmond invests it with the same kind of ritual significance as the latter:

In Vedic sacrifices, priests perform actions and gestures which seem mysterious to a layman, but which serve as a means of communication with the divine world. The kutiyattam actors have appropriated some of these gestures for this same purpose [...]. The uninitiated audience member may not always follow what is being communicated, but the ritual performance is meant not for the audience but for the deity. (1985:57)

Elsewhere, Richmond speaks of the kutiyattam actor’s transformation through a ritual-like trance: “The actor [...] enters the world of the play, gradually and consciously obliterating his own personality and taking on the personality of the character he is to portray” (1990:104). Finally, in her essay on the nangyar, the actresses of kutiyattam, Diane Daugherty obliterates all traces of theatrical performance from the nangyar’s identity through her title, “The Nangyar: Female Ritual Specialist of Kerala,” and then proceeds to completely subordinate the function of performance to that of ritual: “A Nangyar is more than an actress, musician or singer. She is a ritual specialist whose performance [...] is auspicious to see” (1996:54–55).

Though one can take issue with these observations on a variety of specific counts, the focus here is only on certain features that are crucial to the authors’ fundamental approaches to kutiyattam. Generally speaking, the studies mentioned above and the observations quoted are characterized by: (1) the assumption that religious devotion and moralistic perceptions play a major role in the perfor-
formance and appreciation of kutiyattam; (2) a total disregard for or lack of knowledge of the history of kutiyattam; (3) ignorance of the different contexts and social functions of various kinds of rituals; (4) a neglect of the remarkable similarity between kutiyattam and many other practices connected to a traditional society in the employment of ritual; and (5) a general silence on the rich performance techniques and conventions of kutiyattam.

The Role of Religious Devotion

It is fairly obvious that it is the association with the temples and the preponderance of themes from the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that prompt Sullivan to conclude that religious devotion plays a major role in the appreciation of kutiyattam as well as to impose moralistic readings on the plays, in a manner almost reminiscent of miracle or morality plays. However, despite the charm of a simplistic interpretation that considers the kutiyattam performance as concerned primarily with “the vivid depiction onstage of the deity’s triumph over evil and establishment of order in the world” (1997:100), a closer look will easily convince one that things are a bit more complex than Sullivan’s generalizations lead one to believe.

Apart from the fact that it is highly doubtful whether the Hindu epics in general lend themselves to easy moralistic interpretations—to such black and white categorizations as good and evil, vice and virtue, and so on—the specific themes of the plays themselves are far more complex and varied: some are indebted to the main themes of the epics, some are far removed from any concerns of devotion or morality, and some others have nothing to do with the epics at all.

Except for *Balacaritam* (The Story of Krishna As a Child), the theme of which is taken from the *Bhagavatham* (an epic poem that extols Krishna), and the three plays *Pratimanatakam* (The Statue Play), *Abhishekakanatakam* (The Crowning of Rama), and *Ascharyachudamani* (The Wondrous Crest Jewel), all of which are based on the epic *Ramayana*, none of the other plays have much of a connection to “religious themes” or “godly figures.” For instance, *Svapnavasavadattam* (The Vision of Vasavadatta), *Tapatsanvaraman* (Tāpati and King Samvarana), *Subhadrabanjanayam* (Subhadr and Dhananjaya), *Kalyanasayandikam* (The Auspicious Flower), and *Abhijnanasakunatalam* (Sakuntala and the Ring of Recollection)² have romantic love stories as central themes; *Pratijnyayaugandharayanam* (The Minister’s Vow) is about a minister’s endeavor to rescue his king from imprisonment with a neighboring king; *Mattavilasam* (The Farce of the Drunken Monk) and *Bhagavadajjukiyam* (The Sage and the Harlot) are both satirical farces dealing with themes of drunkenness and the transmigration of souls respectively. An ironic exception is *Nagananda* (The Joy of Snakes) by Harsha, but the ostensibly religious content has more to do with the Buddhist theme of self-sacrifice than with Hindu gods or ideals.

This complexity of the kutiyattam repertoire is largely due to the fact that most of the plays that constitute it predate the advent of kutiyattam, and belonged to the pan-Indian tradition of Sanskrit drama long before they became a part of the specifically Kerala tradition, contrary to Sullivan’s assertion that kutiyattam plays are “unlike the classical dramas composed by Kalidasa, Sudraka,” and others (1997:102). As Sudha Gopalakrishnan states, “Kutiyattam includes the plays of almost all the major playwrights in Sanskrit, including Bhasa, Harsha, Saktibhadra, Neelakantha, Bodhayana and Mahendravikramavaram” (1999:2). The dates of composition of some of the plays would suffice to prove the point: while kutiyattam appeared on the scene only around the 10th century c.e., Bhasa wrote *Svapnavasavadattam, Balacaritam, Pratijnayaugandharayanam*, and *Abhishekakanatakam* in the 3rd century c.e.; Harsha wrote *Nagananda* in the 7th century c.e.; Saktibhadra composed *Nagananda* (The Joy of Snakes) by Harsha, but the ostensibly religious content has more to do with the Buddhist theme of self-sacrifice than with Hindu gods or ideals.

2. Acts from *Abhijnanasakunatalam* are considered to have been part of the repertoire earlier and have been performed again recently. Under the direction of G. Venu, a contemporary kutiyattam version of all four acts was first staged at Natanakairali, Irinjalakuda, from 5 to 8 January 2002, and subsequently performed at a number of venues in India and abroad. It may also be pointed out that single acts of the play had been systematized and performed in the 1960s and 70s. For instance, under the direction of Painkulam Rama Cakyar, Act II was performed in 1979, and under the guidance of Mani Madhava Cakyar, Act III was performed in 1982, both at the Kerala Kalamandalam (see Venu 2002:126, 132).
Ascharyachudamani in the 8th century C.E., Mahendra Vikaraman wrote his Mattacilasam in the 
9th century C.E.; Neelakantha composed Kalayanasaugandhika in the 9th century C.E., and Kalidasa 
wrote his Abijnanasakunatalam in the 4th century C.E. In other words, far from being an independent 
tradition that can be placed in opposition to the larger, pan-Indian Sanskrit drama tradition, 
kutiyattam is a local variant of the same and shares with it most of its repertoire, while at the same 
time including a few plays that are exclusive to the repertoire, such as Tapatiwanvaranam (Tapati and 
King Samvarana; 10th century C.E.) and Subhadradhananjayam (Subhadra and Dhananjaya; 10th 
century C.E.) by Kulasakhar Varman.

Even Sullivan’s claims that “underlying the tradition of kutiyattam” are the “religio-aesthetic 
theory” of the Vaishnava bhakti movement and Rupa Gosvami’s idea that the “attainment of rasa 
through devotion [...] is equivalent to moksha” (1997:101) can only be described as ludicrous because 
they fly in the face of historical facts. While Rupa Gosvami’s life spanned the years 1489 to 1564, 
and the Vaishnava bhakti movement gathered force only by the 16th century C.E. (De 1961:4), the 
evidence we have from Natankusa (a 15th century C.E. critique of kutiyattam) clearly indicates that 
by the time this text was written, kutiyattam already had acquired most if not all of the features 
that we identify with it today. Moreover, the Brahminal creed and its associated system of castes—
which were at the heart of the temple establishments attached to kutiyattam—were not only totally 
inimical to the Bhakti movement but also major targets of its “humanist” critique. Interestingly, the 
Bhakti movement did play a major role in the history of Kerala theatre, but that was by way of its 
contribution to the origins of kathakali in the mid-17th century C.E.

At the same time, the very system of kutiyattam and its basic theatrical ethos do not permit devo-
tional approaches, precisely because of the highly self-conscious nature of the kutiyattam theatrical 
performance. In numerous folk/ritual performances, such as theyyam, theyira, or kagura, the god him-
self is supposed to be present and manifested through the actor during the time of performance; in 
other words, the actor is supposed to be transformed into the god-figure he plays and thus accepted 
with reverence by the audience/the faithful. By contrast, in kutiyattam, the actor always maintains 
his or her distinct identity and never fully becomes the character. The actor is the ground on which 
a character is placed and constructed, the neutrality of which is always preserved in order that it can 
be revisited and other characters constructed at the same site, with the possibility of alternation be-
tween characters. In other words, the artifice of the theatre—the fact that it is an actor playing the 
role of a character—is never forgotten in kutiyattam and in many instances is even foregrounded, 
leading the way to the full exploitation of such artifice and generic conventions. To quote Sudha 
Gopalakrishnan:

The actor has no dramatic empathy with the role/roles presented, for it is only a “performance,” with the actor narrating the events and projecting the roles played on the stage. Drama 
here assumes an unparalleled elasticity, and acting establishes the illusory nature of play—
drama is pretence; to see it is to recognize and accept the pretence. (1999:3)

Needless to say, the continued presence of the actor as actor and the awareness on the part of the 
audience of the principles and conventions of acting complicate the development of any religious 
devotion in the kutiyattam theatre. Also significant is the fact that narrative interest in terms of the 
development of the story does not enter into the scheme of appreciation since the larger narratives of 
the plays are already known to the audience and only single acts are performed, that too over a 
period of days. In such a system, of primary importance is the audiovisual theatrical narrative (not 
the story narrative) that is constructed through a succession of specific onstage micro-situations, 
arising either out of the need for elucidation and interpretation of the actual play-text or out of the 
need for the exposition of characters, and offering specific challenges to the actors in terms of skill 
and technique. The critical attention of the initiated audience then is on the actual theatrical cir-
cumstance and the proficiency and virtuosity of the actor(s) in rendering that particular situation, 
in a manner that they have come to expect from previous experience—it is not on any “religious” 
concerns regarding the victory of good over evil or of gods over demons.

This is not to say that kutiyattam has not been employed for “religious” purposes, which indeed 
it has, but in a manner totally unlike that which Sullivan describes. In its prehistory, the form that
was the precursor to kutiyattam must have been connected to Buddhism because the term cakyar, referring to the caste of the kutiyattam actor, is considered to have been derived from the term saka, a member of the Buddhist fold—and also because of the prominence in its repertoire of Harsha’s Buddhist play, Nagananda. “It is conjectured that Buddhists, the earlier settlers in Kerala, made use of drama as a powerful instrument of religious propagation and the particular community engaged in dramatical practices accordingly described as sakya” (Rajendran 1989:8). Much later, after its incorporation into the Brahminical temple establishment and after the inclusion of the cakyars as an antarala jati (intermediate caste) within the caste structure of the temple society (see Narayanan 2005:2–4; and Tarlekar 1997:247–48), kutiyattam figured as an ideological weapon in Vedic Brahminism’s struggle against Buddhism. As the plays Mattavilasam and Bhagavadajjukiyam clearly indicate, kutiyattam provided a forum for intellectual argument and satirical attacks on various aspects of Buddhism. It needs little assertion that nothing can be further removed from devotion and moral education than such religious contestations and debates.

Silence on History

In its initial period of development around the 10th century c.e., kutiyattam was a “secular” form, in the sense that it was totally disconnected from temples and performed primarily in court theatres. The 10th-century records of King Kulasekhara Varman (see Raja 1974:1)—the author of two major plays of the kutiyattam repertoire and during whose time kutiyattam developed into a full-fledged form—give no indication of the plays being in any way linked to temples or having any rituals associated with them. On the other hand, the Vyangavyakhyā, the collection of practical commentaries accompanying the texts of the plays, repeatedly indicates that the king himself, in the costume of an actor, first enacted the plays in the mantrasala (consultation chamber) at the court and reports his promise that later they would be presented by talented actors at the same venue (Unni 1976:48).

Vyangavyakhyā also deals with a number of issues that clearly situate its understanding of kutiyattam as a staged event, a performance, and not a ritual of any sort. For example, it identifies two kinds of spectators—the preksaka (the discerning spectator) and nanajana (common folk)—and the different modes of performance that would provide enjoyment to both (Unni 1976:49); it discusses methods for the expression of vyangyartba (the suggestive subtext) and dhvani (connotation); and it gives instructions about the entrance styles of characters, emotive acting, and many other aspects of performance (Poulose 2001:42–56). In other words, what these commentaries indicate is that a culture of appreciation for performance existed at the time they were written, and that kutiyattam

3. Written by an unknown scholar, a contemporary of Kulasakhara Varman, Vyangavyakhyā consists of practical commentaries with instructions for the staging of the two plays, Subhadradhananjayam and Tāpitāsamovaranam. Originally written not as a “book” but only as a manual to assist actors, these commentaries were known for a long time as Dhananjayadhvani and Samvaranadhvani, the collective title Vyangavyakhyā being a very recent one (see Poulose 2001:40).
at this stage was definitely intended and employed as a form of performance for a human audience and not a divine one.

The “secular” context of kuttiyattam underwent a transformation when it was incorporated into what may be described as the temple-centered social order that developed in Kerala. In a major formative event in the region’s history, a number of temple-centered agrarian villages, headed by Brahmans, were established in northern and central Kerala, between the 8th and 12th centuries (Veluthat 1978:17). The temples became the central determining factor of society, shaping every aspect of its economic, social, and cultural life and organizing a vertical caste system on the basis of the hierarchy of positions in the temple society (Gurukkal 1994:398). It was into this temple-centered order that kuttiyattam was integrated, like many other social activities and cultural practices. Based on the fact that the first kuttampalams, the temple theatres, were built in the 15th century (Madhu 2002:20), it is safe to assume that kuttiyattam was brought into the temples in the 14th or, at the earliest, the 13th century.

It must have been at this point that rituals were appended to the performance, but interestingly, only at the beginning and at the end, as a method of bracketing it off, of placing it under the quotation marks of temple patronage, of providing it with the aura of sacredness as a temple-related practice, while the main body of performance remained intact and retained almost all of its original systems, techniques, and conventions. That the rituals were a later and external imposition, a kind of ideological packaging, is confirmed also by the absence of any internal continuity between the rituals and the plays, in either nature or content. As we saw earlier, far from being ritualistic, the plays are consciously artistic, with themes ranging from romantic love, to political intrigue, to the comic transmigration of souls—a fact that in itself is quite natural, given that most of them predate not only the temple society but in some instances even the formal beginnings of kuttiyattam. Not surprisingly, none of these historical details make much of an appearance in Western studies of kuttiyattam because they rest rather uneasily with their ritualistic and devotional interpretations. Perhaps even more importantly, one suspects, this denial of history is a denial of the right to history of non-Western societies, a denial of their status as human societies subject to change, development, and transformation.

Self-Contained Rituals and Associative Rituals

A major feature of the studies quoted earlier is the way in which they draw parallels between different kinds of rituals with little regard for their specificities. By losing sight of important distinctions in context and function for different categories of ritual, they end up treating such diverse phenomena as Vedic sacrifices, temple rituals undertaken by priests, rites of passage, and the rituals connected to a kuttiyattam performance as if they are all practically one and the same, and thus arrive at questionable conclusions of similarity. A closer look indicates that, broadly speaking, these studies fail to distinguish between two general types of rituals: self-contained rituals and associative rituals.

Self-contained rituals are independent, stand-alone practices in themselves, not associated with or dependent on any other activity, and conducted for some specific purpose that is built into the

4. For more details on this process, see Narayanan (forthcoming:2–4).

5. It may be noted that, though there are some references to it, the contemporary history of the form also does not find adequate representation in these studies. From the late 1950s on, led by the heroic efforts of Painkulam Rama Cakyar to take the form out of the temples and to introduce it to wider audiences, there has been a steady process of secularization that has witnessed the introduction of a department of kuttiyattam at Kerala Kalamandalam (the state institute of arts); the establishment of training centers for kuttiyattam at Margi and Natanakairali; the training of actors and actresses from castes other than the cakyars and the nangyars; and the presentation of performances at a variety of venues outside the temples.
structure of the ritual itself. For instance, Vedic fire sacrifices such as the *Agnishtomam* or the *Agni-cayanam* are self-contained rituals, not connected with any other activity, and conducted for “the prosperity of people at large by energizing and protecting the environment” by making offerings to the sun through the agency of fire, “a representation of the Sun’s energy” (Nambudiripad and Bhattathiripad 2003:1). Another example of a self-contained ritual would be the Hindu devotional worship known as *puja*, which when conducted in a temple is not connected with any other activity and “appears to have no purpose other than to please the deity” to which it is offered (Bell 1997:109).

Associative rituals, on the other hand, are those that are conducted in connection with other practices or activities and are performed primarily for the successful conduct and completion of those particular practices and activities. For example, mass prayers and other rituals in which soldiers engage before going to battle are associative rituals, aimed at victory in the battle that is to follow. Another example would be the rituals connected to the different stages in the construction of a house or building, beginning with the initial preparation of the land through to the final formal inhabitation of the building—practices that persist to this day in many parts of India. Yet another example would be the calendrical rites connected with the activities of sowing or raising and harvesting, or slaughtering, in an agricultural community. As Catherine Bell points out, “the sowing of seed is usually marked by offerings to ancestors or deities in order to secure protection for the fields” (1997:103). Of critical importance here is the fact that though associative rituals add value and seriousness to the practice to which they are attached, they do not turn the practice into a ritual because the functional nature of the practice is always retained. In other words, the mere presence of associative rituals does not turn a practice into a ritual; rather, it emphasizes the functionality of the practice and its importance to those involved.

This distinction between self-contained rituals and associative rituals is crucial because in traditional societies—especially the traditional temple society into which kutiyattam was incorporated—associative rituals were performed for most major vocations and practices, such as the construction of houses (as mentioned), the conduct of business, engagement in battle or warfare, teaching and learning, writing literature, or staging a performance, just to mention a few. Obviously, such rituals were intended to impart greater significance to a specific activity and set it apart from others that are more mundane.6

At the same time, the rituals also comprise an intangible economy that contributed in no small measure to the legitimation and maintenance of the real material economy of traditional societies. In the case of the temple society to which kutiyattam was connected, its real economy was an agrarian one, based primarily on the ownership and lease of land, with different castes having specific roles, vocations, and positions within a social structure centered on the authority of the temple.7 There was also the rise of this intangible economy, parallel to the real economy and supporting it, which valued each practice not merely in terms of its effects or end products, such as wages or profits, but also in terms of the immaterial benefits that would accrue from what was perceived as service to the gods and their representatives on earth, the kings and the Brahmins. The different vocations, occupations, and life practices associated with each caste came to be seen not only in terms of their real value as economic practices, but also in terms of “sacred value,” as services to a divine principle that transcended the realm of the human and the social. As a method of legitimation,
this ideological discourse or intangible economy played a crucial role in institutionalizing and maintaining the division and hierarchy of castes and the continuation of each vocation.

However unreal or irrational this particular system of sacred value may seem to an outsider, to subjects engaged in such vocations and their associated ideologies, it was very compelling and probably provided a form of satisfaction far greater than that accrued from real monetary wages. The rituals that came to be associated with different vocations and caste practices were a manifestation of the process of sacralization associated with the intangible economy. Kutiyattam, therefore, was neither unique nor even an exception; it was like many other practices of the day—carpentry, medicine, trading, soldiering, teaching—all of which had rituals associated with them, each of which was considered a sacred vocation by its practitioners. Thus, though Sullivan finds it a “surprising attitude” in an actor, the sentiment expressed by Ammannur Madhava Cakyar in his description of his acting as a “sacred religious duty [...] comparable to saying a prayer” (in Sullivan 1997:103) was not limited to cakyars and kutiyattam, but in fact was shared by the exponents of a number of traditional and caste-based vocations. The extent and power of this ideological outlook is clearly demonstrated by the fact that over time it came to affect not only the aforesaid vocations but also other occupations that had little to do with caste identities or traditional social systems.8

It becomes apparent, then, that the over-ritualization of kutiyattam in Western studies is a result of it being pried loose and extracted from its historical and social contexts, and viewed in isolation. Even more importantly, if kutiyattam is to be considered a ritual per se on the grounds that there are associative rituals connected to it, then the same will have to be done with every other practice that has rituals attached to it, thereby including in its ranks such unlikely candidates as carpentry, medical practice, teaching, and so on—the sheer absurdity of such a proposal exposing the deep flaws that are inherent in the tendency toward over-ritualization.

Another issue that needs to be addressed here is the description of kutiyattam as a chakshusha yajna (visual sacrifice), which seems to have played a key role in its perception as a ritual and provided a major impetus to the entire enterprise of over-ritualization. Richmond employs it in the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay (1978:28) and also in two other articles (Richmond and Richmond 1985:54, 1990:88); as does Diane Daugherty, who proceeds to “confirm its applicability” not only to kutiyattam but also to the related nangyar kuttu (1996:65). What is noteworthy in all of these references to the notion of “visual sacrifice” is that, in addition to the suggestion that the description is specific or unique to kutiyattam, there is also a glaring omission of its original source. It is common knowledge to most scholars familiar with the field that the term “chakshusha yajna” comes from a famous verse in Kalidasa’s Malavikagnimitra (Malavika and Agnimitra; see Chaturvedi 1980:243), and that far from referring to kutiyattam (which it could not have done, because it pre-dates kutiyattam by at least six centuries), it refers to drama in general. A brief summary of the verse will clarify the matter:

Sages have called this a charming visual sacrifice to please the gods; Lord Shiva, along with Uma, has divided this into two parts (laya, the feminine aspect, and tandava, the male aspect); through the three gunas (the three qualities: satva—purity; rajas—activity; tamas—darkness, inertia) and the different rasa, this natya (drama) shows the affairs of the world and greatly pleases people of different tastes.9

8. Kathakali is a case in point. Though it originated only by the mid-17th century and was not caste-based or temple-related, rituals punctuate the different stages of its performance and training, and many of its practitioners share the idea that their performances are indeed offerings to the gods.

9. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.
It is obvious that Kalidasa’s verse partakes of the culture of the *Natyasastra* (c. 200 B.C.E.–200 C.E.), the ancient Indian text on dramaturgy attributed to the sage Bharatamuni, in its reference to the parts (*gunas*) and rasas of *natya* (drama), its vision of the subject matter of drama as the “affairs of the world,” and its identification of the real audience of drama as the people at large (see Bharatamuni 1987, vol. 1:88, 101, 144, 242). It is also obvious that the *Natyasastra’s* object is not any specific dramatic form but the entire corpus of forms that fall under the description of natya. It is in this context that one reads without surprise L.S. Rajagopalan’s pithy comment: “Any drama is a visual sacrifice. What is a sacrifice? You can offer something to the gods through fire; here you offer something through the eyes” (in Daugherty 1996:65). Thus, it stands to reason that the initial idea of “visual sacrifice” is a customary dedication to the gods—common in most traditional societies and literatures—which lends to any drama a gravity that distinguishes it from other mundane activities. As G.K. Bhat observes,

In India, every honest activity, including the arts, was regarded as dedication to Gods. The *Natyasastra* clearly recognizes music, dance and drama as different forms of worship; and Kalidasa describes *natya* as a “visual sacrifice” offered unto the gods. To ascribe a divine origin to the performing arts is a way of extolling them to establish their importance in human life. (1982:2)

This constitutes, as we saw earlier, a process of sacralization that has clear ideological roots. However, proceeding on the basis of this particular verse toward an identification of *kutiyattam* as a ritual per se and as the one form that answers to the description of “visual sacrifice” is to deny the facts.

**Disregard for/Distortion of Features of Performance**

The artistry and variety of the themes of *kutiyattam* plays have been mentioned earlier. Though the same words can be applied to the rich theatrical conventions and techniques of the *kutiyattam* performance, with its systems of stylized acting, its methods of elaboration and narrative interpolation, and its diverse deployment of theatrical space and time, these performance elements hardly figure prominently in Western studies. They are subordinated to the overarching preoccupation with ritual. This is not to say that there is no mention of the actualities of performance; however, the studies seldom go beyond a straightforward narrative description of the stages and processes of performance, with little critical attention to the interrogation and analysis of *kutiyattam’s* distinct performance conventions and techniques. Even such a crucial feature as *pakarnnattam* (transference of character)—where an actor representing one character instantaneously changes into another with a simple rearrangement of the costume, proceeds to perform as the second character, and then changes back into the first—does not appear except as a passing mention, and that too in the work of just one writer.10 As Sudha Gopalakrishnan describes:

Pakarnnattam is a unique device perfected in *kutiyattam*, which gives immense scope for the actor to call upon his histrionic and imaginative faculties. The actor during the course of his acting steps out of her/his role and through the stream of consciousness of the protagonist assumes the roles of all the other characters imagined by that person and elaborates the context/scene according to his/her skill and imagination. (1999:3)

More than anything else, pakarnnattam is a convention that totally precludes any actor-character identification, thus demonstrating the fundamental nonrealistic and flexible nature of the *kutiyattam* theatre, capturing in the fullest possible sense the idea of the transferability of the theatrical sign. Though it is a feature that has received considerable critical attention from scholars in India11 and

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10. “Thus even a reference to, for example, the Goddess Kali in the drama’s text allows for a lengthy account and enactment of the myth, one actor taking all parts necessary” (Sullivan 1997:104).

11. See, for example, Gopalakrishnan (1999); Poulose (2001:79–84).
has also inspired many contemporary theatre practitioners, most Western studies of kutiyattam fail to even acknowledge its existence, let alone attempt an analysis.

In the few instances where there is indeed an attempt to analyze a significant performance element, it often leads to gross mystification and distortion, or an interpretation of the feature as an aspect of ritual. A case in point is the parallel drawn between the gestures of kutiyattam and those of Vedic sacrifices (Richmond 1985:57), which shows little appreciation of the fact that not only the purposes but also the very practices of each are radically different. On the one hand, the gestures that accompany the recitation of Vedic texts are aids in the exact rendering of the mantras (chants) through their representation of the formal properties of the sound and intonation patterns required for the recitation. On the other hand, the gestures of kutiyattam communicate specific meanings that can be rendered in language. In other words, Vedic gestures are formal, kutiyattam gestures are semantic; the former represents sounds, the latter indicates meaning.12

At the same time, the gestures of kutiyattam are very similar, even identical in some instances, to those used by most classical dance and theatre forms in India that are based on the Natyasastra, including kathakali, bharatanatyam, and kuchipudi. However, this fact is never acknowledged, probably because it would undermine the assertion that these gestures are “mysterious to a layman” and that “the performance is meant not for the audience but for the deity” (Richmond 1985:57); the same would then apply to the other forms as well, a claim that would be extremely difficult to defend.

Another aspect of kutiyattam performance neglected in Western studies is the role of the vidushaka, the clown-figure. There could not be a more anti-ritualistic figure within the kutiyattam performance system than the vidushaka.

Similar in some respects to the clown in Elizabethan drama. If ritual is serious, reverent, and participatory, the vidushaka, with his “Apollonian” comic qualities, is irreverent and nonparticipatory. With verbal narrative being his forte, he takes up a position somewhere between the onstage and offstage worlds while not belonging entirely to either. He is in the play, but not quite. He is indeed a character in the play, and is usually the protagonist’s friend and companion, yet he is also free to comment, interpret, parody, and elaborate on the events and statements of the stage, as if he is outside the play. He also belongs to the audience...but not quite. While the rest of the characters can never acknowledge the presence of the audience or directly interact with them, the vidushaka makes direct remarks to the audience, comments on them, makes fun of them, asks them questions, and also refers to features, events, and persons figuring in their lives. The audience, however, can never talk back to the vidushaka or bring him down to their mundane level, their responses being limited solely to passive actions such as laughter, sounds of appreciation, and so on. In a sense, the vidushaka inhabits a time/space matrix between that of the play and that of the audience and functions as a link between the two worlds.

12. It has to be pointed out here that a Western scholar, John Sowle, has indeed indicated this difference; but his unpublished dissertation, which presents a more comprehensive and accurate picture of kutiyattam, has unfortunately not received the attention that the other examples given in this article have. He says of the gestures:

It may be that the use of gesture language in the drama was in part inspired by the Brahman’s use of mudras (gestures) in the learning of the Vedas. An elaborate set of hand gestures is used by Nambutiris when teaching the Rigveda. They indicate the sounds of certain syllables whose exact nature might otherwise not be clear. [...] Some of these mudras are identical to the hastas (hand gestures) used in Kautiyattam and Kathakali, but they are used for an entirely different purpose. They stand for sounds rather than words and ideas. A different set of hand gestures is used by the Samavedins. They are more complex than the Rigvedic mudras and are used primarily to aid in remembering the svaras of the Samaveda. No system of gestures associated with sounds or musical values is used in Kautiyattam. (Sowle 1982:172)
Through translation of the protagonist’s dialogues into the local language, Malayalam, and through the parodic repetition of verses, comic interpretation, and humorous elaboration, the vidushaka makes the content of the play, especially the part of the protagonist, accessible to the audience by providing an on-the-spot commentary on the protagonist’s travails and statements. He is also a link between the time of the story and the time of the audience: through remarks that reflect contemporary states of affairs, comic extrapolations of current events and persons, and direct comments to members of the audience, interwoven into and connected to his narration, the vidushaka brings the time of the performance closer to the time of the audience, bringing the play and the spectators closer together, blurring the boundaries between the two, sometimes even seemingly erasing and dissolving them with his presence, all the while covertly reinforcing their differences.

In one sense, then, the vidushaka is probably the best example of the conventionality of the kutiyattam theatre—its acknowledgment that it is, first and foremost, theatre. He epitomizes kutiyattam, demonstrating with his every word and action that, despite the rituals and the sacred aura, the play’s reason d’être is the audience: kutiyattam exists ultimately for the entertainment and edification of its onlookers.

It is not entirely surprising that most Western scholars have diligently avoided close study of the vidushaka’s role, because it requires a strong firsthand knowledge of a highly Sanskritized Malayalam, and the subtle turns of phrase, puns, comic verbal acrobatics, and contemporary references that figure in the vidushaka’s use of the language—a knowledge that is usually accessible only to a cultural insider. Probably the only instance where there is some serious consideration of the vidushaka is also another example of distortion tied to over-ritualization. The vidushaka role is presented as a profane threat to the ritual purity and sacredness of kutiyattam:

The clown brings Kutiyattam dangerously close to the profane world and to the culture’s workday notion of space and time. This profane aspect of space and time is the very thing that the performance’s rituals and the kuttambalam building’s cosmic significance carefully lead away from by transporting the audience into the sacred and mythical world. This playtime is a time of mirth for the audience that sits enthralled at the performance of the vidushaka. It is, however, also a time of some anxiety and caution because it is the one time when profane time and space can and may come into contact with sacred time and space.

This comment, which appears toward the end of an article that examines the “sacred” nature of space and time in kutiyattam, is another example of how generalizations are imposed on the genre on the basis of the external features of its setting and the rituals that figure at the beginning and end of performance. Since the kuttampalam is a consecrated space that belongs to the prasada (temple) form of architecture, and since there are rituals that clearly demarcate the time of performance from ordinary time as well as the performance activities of the practitioners from ordinary human actions, it is assumed by the authors that kutiyattam is a wholly ritualistic form and that whatever happens in performance should also be entirely in keeping with its “sacred,” ritualistic character. It is only a short step from this to deeming any feature or figure of performance that does not seem to fit into this sacred characterization as a threat and as a source of anxiety.

However, if one takes into consideration that the vidushaka has been an indispensable, essential part of kutiyattam for most of its long history (see Raja 1974:2), that the role is usually reserved for the most senior and experienced actor, and that the audience invariably sees the vidushaka’s time on the stage as a high point in the performance, it will be obvious that the anxiety is certainly not on the part of the performers or the audience, but actually on the part of the authors. By reducing the entirety of the performance to a ritual and denying the validity of those performance features that conflict with this characterization, the authors ignore a fundamental principle of all art forms: multidimensionality. No form of art, especially theatre, can be reduced to a single explanation or a singular dimension without inflicting grievous violence upon its artistic richness and multifaceted qualities.
Besides providing aesthetic enjoyment and artistic entertainment, the major function of kutiyattam is social, specifically in terms of the social critique conducted by the vidushaka. As the eminent Sanskrit scholar K.P. Narayana Pisharody observes:

The vidushaka has a very high place in kutiyattam; he is probably more important than even the hero. The vidushaka not only makes the audience laugh but his duties also include the multifaceted improvement of their knowledge, wisdom, and culture [...]. The significance of the term “vidushaka” is most suited to the vidushakas of kutiyattam. After all, a vidushaka is one who brings to light the faults of others in a special manner. And, what is this special manner? Through the narration and interpretation of stories and episodes connected to the play, the vidushaka proclaims the faults of the spectators, thereby helping them to become aware of them and correct them. (Pisharody 1976:33)

It is evident that, far from being a threat, this facility for social critique imparts to the vidushaka a contemporaneity that must have appealed to audiences throughout the centuries. In fact, it is only reasonable to assume that the vidushaka, by virtue of this facility, must have played a crucial role in kutiyattam’s successful endurance of the vicissitudes of time and society for more than 10 centuries. As Kapila Vatsyayan remarks:

The secret of the survival of Kutiyattam lies as much in the ability of the Cakyar community to safeguard and preserve traditions of an earlier epoch as in their ability to adapt to new situ-
ations, to respond to local and immediate concerns, and to be flexible enough to be able to give their presentation contemporary significance [...]. The innovative flexibility which was provided [...] to the character of the vidushaka through the use of local dialect and the liberty of ridiculing the four sacrosanct Purusarthas must have given the form scope for renewal, re-interpretation and improvisation. (Vatsyayan 1980:21)

The attempt to limit and regulate the identity of kutiyattam by presenting the role of the vidushaka as a profane threat to its sacred nature also denies the deep historical and cultural inscriptions within the convention. Firstly, the vidushaka has been an integral part of Sanskrit drama from its very beginnings, figuring in the works of almost all major playwrights such as Bhasa, Kalidasa, Sudraka, Harsha, and Bodhayana. The Natyasasra fully recognizes the importance of the convention, based on the principle that hasya (humor/laughter) is closely associated with sringara (love), thus ensuring a natural place for the vidushaka as the companion of the hero in a comedy of love (see Bhat 1982:1).

In terms of the vidushaka’s station in life, the Natyasasra also classifies the role into four major types—the tapasa (hermit), the dvija (Brahmin), rajajivi (royal employee), and shishya (student) (Bharatamuni 1987, vol. 2:515)—out of which the latter three are featured on the kutiyattam stage. Secondly, the role is also present to various degrees and shapes in many other forms that evolved in different parts of the Indian subcontinent, thus situating kutiyattam very much in the mainstream of not just Sanskrit drama, but Indian drama in general. As Kapila Vatsyayan points out, “The vidushaka’s role as communicator between high and low, past and present, provides a strong basis of commonality amongst seemingly heterogeneous forms throughout India” (1980:26). Thirdly, to a great extent it is the vidushaka who imparts a uniquely Kerala identity to kutiyattam. Apart from the fact that this character owes a lot to similar figures and conventions in other folk art forms of Kerala such as mutiyettu, tira, and teyyam (see Poulose 2001:185), the local costume, the use of the local Malayalam language, and the frequent references in perorations to local events, figures, and features, are what give kutiyattam its distinctly local color and flavor.

In addition, it has also been suggested that the mono-act of the vidushaka, as it appears in prabandham kuttu (the narrative form connected to kutiyattam), may have actually been the proto-form of kutiyattam, a crucial midpoint stage in the evolution from the single-narrator presentation of the puranas, or epics, to the multi-actor drama. As Killimangalam Vasudevan Nambudiripad points out, the importance of verbal narrative, the question-answer structure, the preponderance of sub-stories given as examples, the narrator himself speaking as different characters, and the frequent shifts from the narrative time to the past and back are all features of the narrative structure of the epics (2001). The same can be found also in prabandham kuttu, where the cakyar—in the costume, makeup, and manner of the vidushaka—tells stories from the epics. Similar features, albeit in a dramatic context, such as an interpretative acting method that follows a question-answer structure, the use of sub-verses and sub-stories to explain the main story, one actor appearing as a number of characters (pakkarnattam), and the progressive shifts between the present and the past in nirvahana (the exposition of character) are all found in kutiyattam too.

So, while conventional wisdom has it that prabandham kuttu is an offshoot derived from kutiyattam, in light of the fact that there is a continuity between the narrative style of the epics and the acting style of kutiyattam, it has been proposed that the prabandham kuttu, being a quasi-narrative, quasi-dramatic form, could have been a bridge between the two. This would have been a significant stage in the evolution of kutiyattam from the epics, thus giving the vidushaka the status of the original character, the fountainhead of kutiyattam (see Nambudiripad 2001:37). Whether one agrees

13. The four purusarthas of Hindu philosophy are artha (wealth), kama (desire), dharma (righteousness/duty), and moksha (salvation). In the vidushaka’s perorations, they are ironically represented as vancana (deception), asana (satisfaction of the palate), rajaseva (loyal service to the king), and vinoda (sensual pleasure).

14. Prabandham kuttu is also presented by the cakyars, the actors of kutiyattam, and is a one-man narrative performance form where the actor appears in the garb of the vidushaka and narrates stories primarily from the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics.
with this interpretation of history or not, the convention of the vidushaka is undeniably central to the practices and traditions of kutiyattam, a centrality that can however be appreciated only if one is inclined to approach kutiyattam as a performance form and not merely as a ritual.

The Implications

In conclusion, one has to ask what the cultural and political implications are of this Western tendency to impose an over-ritualistic interpretation on kutiyattam, thus denying it the status of aesthetic performance and the attention and analysis that it deserves on that count. In one sense, it is obvious that at work here is what Edward Said calls the strategies of Orientalism (1978), or what Amartya Sen describes as the “exoticist approach to the East” with its focus on “what is different, what is strange” (1997:4). By practically positing ritual and performance as mutually exclusive categories, and with kutiyattam being depicted as a ritual steeped in mystery—devoid of history, artistic value, or rational thought—the implicit contrast is to the modern theatre of the West, particularly the realist one, which is taken as the uncontested paradigm of artistic sophistication and dramatic achievement.

On the one hand, this contrast has been made possible by the systematic obliteration in the West of many practices, dramatic and otherwise, that can be described as “traditional” and, on the other, by a patent inability on the part of Western scholars of kutiyattam to “see” the secular rituals associated with contemporary Western theatre. More importantly however, through this contrast, an “other” is established, which reproduces in a new context the old colonial binary oppositions between the East and the West, the ritualistic and the rational, the backward and the developed, the uncivilized and the civilized. Richard Schechner writes:

The colonial practice of entering the “exotic,” “primitive,” or “unknown” (to the West) continues to this day under the auspices of such organizations as the National Geographic Society. Because treating human societies in the manner of the nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century adventurers is no longer appropriate, attention has refocused on wildlife and the challenges of nature—the life-cycle of a pride of lions on the Serengeti, the perils of scaling Mt. Everest, or the challenge of raising unbroken dinnerware from the Titanic. (2003:113)

While one would agree to a large measure with Schechner’s observation, what one can still perceive in the discourses that over-ritualize kutiyattam is the continued exoticization, though under a different rhetorical guise, of “other” human societies and practices.

The full implications of this “otherness” become evident only when it is realized that the exoticist approach goes hand in hand with the “magisterial” approach which, as Sen puts it, “assimilates a sense of superiority and guardianhood” essential for imperialism (Sen 1997:4). A single example will suffice to demonstrate this: in her discussion of the issues of purity and pollution of temple theatres, Diane Daugherty writes:

When I sponsored nangyar kuttu in the Thissur Vatakummanathan Temple’s theatre, my foreign guests were checked to ascertain that they had converted to Hinduism, for only Hindus may enter Kerala temples. Just before that performance in 1989, I visited the kuttambalam and noted numerous cigarette butts. When I expressed my dismay in an interview by a local newspaper, the subsequent discovery that a temple employee was not only smoking in the kuttambalam but also bringing women there for assignations necessitated elaborate purification rites. (1996:56)

The highly complex concepts of purity and pollution that are associated with an extensive body of beliefs, discourses, and practices have been here reduced to a simplistic personal example that raises serious doubts about the real motivations of the comment. Apart from the smug assurance of a money-filled wallet (amply assisted by the inequalities of the international currency exchange mechanism) and the gratuitous repetition of the first-person singular pronoun, what is remarkable about the passage is the thinly veiled suggestion that even their own traditions are not safe with the “na-
tives” unless there is a discerning Western “sponsor” to supervise and hold them to account. The seeming reverence for tradition is equally matched here by the all-too-real contempt for the custodians of the tradition and the alacrity with which the slightest opportunity to tarnish them is grasped. At the same time, also lost in the humorless thrust of magisterial judgment is the ability to appreciate the continually unfolding “rituals” and “dramas” of contemporary real life and the flexible practicality that has always described the insider’s interactions with living traditions.

The reductive image of kutiyattam as ritual, constructed by these Western studies, has also considerably affected what Amartya Sen calls the “self-images (or internal identities)” (1997:2) of Indians involved with the form today. Sen is referring to the way in which these studies have influenced the discourse and practice of Indian artists, critics, and managers in the last few years. While most Indian studies of kutiyattam up until the 1990s focused primarily on its historical, theatrical, and literary aspects,15 since the ’90s there has been a tendency to foreground the ritualistic dimension and consider it as constitutive of the form as a whole. A good example is the candidature file of kutiyattam for UNESCO’s designation as one of the “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.” While it does pay attention to the history, social contexts, and performance features of the form, it also declares in no uncertain terms that “the drama that happens on the Kutiyattam stage symbolically represents a visual sacrifice (chakshusha yajna) and therefore each and every component of the drama has a sacred significance” (Margi 2000:14). The same is true of some kutiyattam artists, too, who have in more recent times begun to focus on ideas of ritual seriousness, the performance as a sacrifice, identification with the character, etc. At best, these are just cynical responses prompted by their awareness of where the money lies, or perhaps the artists are just saying what the interviewer wants to hear; but at worst, they have begun to believe in these ideas and allow their performances to be influenced by them. Even more importantly, and perhaps much more dangerously, this discourse, through its emphasis on ritual mysteries and its attempts to establish Vedic roots for kutiyattam, may open the door for kutiyattam’s appropriation into revivalist, right-wing Hindu discourses that promote the recreation in contemporary life of a “glorious Hindu past.” This faction has already succeeded in making their odious presence felt in many areas of Indian culture. That, in fact, will be the ultimate irony: the agendas of neocolonialism and religious revivalism co-operating to create an ideological climate that is mutually reinforced.

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