

THOLPAVAKOOTHU: THE SHADOW PUPPETRY OF KERALA

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Tholpavakoothu is a form of shadow puppetry that is practiced in Kerala, India. It is performed using leather puppets as a ritual dedicated to Bhadrakali and is performed in Devi temples in specially built theatres called Koothumadams. This art form is especially popular in the Palakkad, Thrissur, and Malappuram districts of Kerala. "Thol" means 'leather', "Pava" means "Doll" and "Koothu" means "The Play". It is believed to have originated in the Ninth century AD and uses Kama Ramayana as its basic text. The performance language uses Tamil, Sanskrit, and Malayalam words. Like Mudi yettu, and Padayani, *tholpavakoothu* is also an art form that is dedicated to Bhadrakali. The art form was part of a temple ritual that replaced to the audience dawn based on selected stories from the Tamil epic Kama Ramayana.

The original *tholpavakoothu* performance lasted ten hours from dusk till dawn and performed for 21 days. According to legend *tholpavakoothu* was performed at the request of Bhadrakali who could not witness Ravana's killing as she was unable to witness the legendary battle she expressed this desire to see it once again to lord Shiva who then commanded her to visit a temple where she first witnessed *tholpavakoothu*. The art forms was part of a temple ritual that replaced to the audience right through the night till the break of dawn based on selected stories from the Tamil epic "Kamba Ramayana". The puppets for each show are handmade with goat skin and adorned with naturally extracted colours. It usually takes a month to makes. Today puppet making is a part of our family profession. Traditional *tholpavakoothu*, performance are held in around 85 temples of Palakkad. *Tholpavakoothu* the unique shadow puppet theatre form of Kerala south Indian is preserved as a family tradition by the pulavars. 160 puppets are used for the complete version of the kamba Ramayana representing 71 characters in four main categories. Besides puppets to depict nature battle scenes and ceremonial parades. Kerala over the years has laid immense focus on maintaining and enriching the cultural heritage of India. This unique shadow puppetry *tholpavakoothu* is an ancient peculiar ritualistic art form dedicated to Bhagavati, worshiped by the people of Kerala as the mother goddess, and preserved as a family tradition by the pulavar.

The artist of Koonathara troupe have been pioneers in continuing the practice of the art form over is 14 generation long genealogy. One of the most active troupes of *tholpavakoothu* artist to continually practice this art form in an ever changing social environment of India. The art form origins are from Tamil itinerant groups from "Shaivist Community" usually belonging to "Vellalchetti" and Nair castes who travelled and performed popular Tamil folk tales through the medium of shadow puppetry along the river

Bharathappuzha. The art form was traditionally passed down to the male members of the families. The puppeteers called 'Pulavar' were scholars with knowledge of many subjects. The art form became more multifaceted in late 20th century.

When the revolutionary artist the late master puppeteer Krishnankutty Pulavar led the troupe in to performing outside the temple for the first time, and eventually even enacting tales other than Ramayana through the shadow puppets. The artists brought several innovations to the art form in order to grow the art form so that it evolves in a way that it is relevant to larger audience and also to depend on it as a source of livelihood. The art form now regularly performs on stages outside the temple contexts. It enacts various stories and religious. This study does not view the various changes in the art form as purely transitional from local to western etc... The study explores the various definitions and dimensions of the historical and traditional elements of the art form of the processes it goes through-out of the innovations introduced to the art form on the strategies used by the artists and their continued efforts that enables its continuation. The study relates the changes in the art form to larger changes that occur in the society. In the first chapter the history of the art forms and discusses the legend and community of *tholpavakoothu*. In the second chapter discuss the manipulation of the puppets and musical instruments of *tholpavakoothu*. In the third chapter, discuss the performance and trope of this art form. In the fourth chapter, a section on the strategies and response of the *tholpavakoothu* artist of the koonathara troupe during the crisis puts a light on the strategies by the artists in the face of challenges. The objectives of this study is to understand and analyze the various strategies used by the artist to change and adapt in order to keep continuing the practice of *tholpavakoothu* in a changing society.

Tholpavakoothu (leather puppet play) occupies a very prominent place among the ancient art-forms of Kerala. This art is presented periodically at the Bhagavati or Bhadrakali temples of palakkad and the neighboring areas as part of the ritualistic worship of the goddess. The theme of the *tholpavakoothu* is always the story of the Ramayana. *Tholpavakoothu* is performed in a specially built playhouse called koothu madam in the temples premises. The puppets of the various characters are cut out from fine leather in the right shape and size and their shadows are projected on a white screen. *Pavakoothu* is usually performed during the annual utsava (festival) in kali temples. It is believed that the goddess will be watching the performance right from the beginning till the end and will be pleased by it.

It is believed that the world theater stage originated from the shadow puppet light originated with the origin of the earth Indian poetry sees primitive sounds as the light of the universe. With the creation of primitive man, his image began to move with him in the shadows. Humans began to act by gesturing moving their eyes and necks and dancing with their feet finding dynamics in all their limbs and transforming them in to sign-language shadow plays. Puppetry became a powerful weapon of social renaissance glorifying wild kings, local kings, and the royal court. *tholpavakoothu* or puppetry is an art form that has been around the world since ancient times. It is a very popular art form. It is also known as

pavakali, puppet play and shadow play, and has a very ancient history. Countries like Europe, Egypt, Indonesia, srilanka, India Russia etc... have been part of the puppet show scene since ancient times.

Ancient documents show that puppetry was as popular as today's film screenings as early as a thousand years before Christ. It is also amazing that the oldest koothumadams in the world to perform Tholpavakoothu are only found in the Bhagavathy temples in Kerala. There was a large crowd here to enjoy the spectacular display of Ramayana and Mahabharata stories performed on stage using shadow and light only in the stillness of the night during festivals. Although four types of puppetry still exist in the world, there is no clear indication of the historical background or origin. Richard Pisculs book 'The home of the puppet play' states that puppetry originated in India. Many art historians disagree with this argument. Other arguments are that the puppet originated in china or Greece. No one can dispute that puppetry is one of the oldest forms of visual art regardless of its origin and that puppetry existed before human drama.¹ The theme of the puppet show was the stories of the kings, princess and heroes who ruled the country. Since then the story has shifted from historical to political and humorous but the basis has been the presentation of epic tales puppetry gained a new dimension as a ritual forms as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata began to be performed on the stage in connection with the temples Defeat puppets became popular in Kerala, Tamilnadu Orissa Karnataka, and centuries ago. Puppetry played an important role in the performing arts of ancient Indian culture; the invention of light creates the shadow and its rhythmic movement created the puppets and the shadow puppetry grew in to the visual art form of the ancient people. The history of shadow puppetry in Kerala has not been recorded till now. It is argued that it originated in Tamilnadu due to the influence of the Tamil language. In addition to the kamba Ramayana, the valmikirmayana is also used for puppetry in Kerala. Tamil Sanskrit and the vernacular dialects of Kerala were used for this purpose. Puppetry varied according to the type of materials used for the art presentation, the local variety and the variation of the stories. *Nizhalpavakoothu*, *olappavakoothu*, later developed in to art forms called *tholpavakoothu*. There are more than hundred permanent venues for Kerala's losers. Due to the importance of the ritual it is still practical in the Devi temples in around Palakkad. The puppets of the characters and the puppets of the scene are suitable for the context of the story. The influences of the traditional painting style of the area are a feature of shadow puppets. Shadow puppetry is characterizes by imaginative use to make still images dynamics. Various elements such as image, sculpture, movement, theatricality, instrument, music, drama, shadow, light, and technical process enliven the art form of *Tholpavakoothu*. It is an attempt to reinterpret the Tamil text of the Ramayana and to convey this national text to the general public through theatrical presentation. If the comparative study is a dialogue between the Aryan and Dravidian cultures, then the concept of Tholpavakoothu reborn from the kamba Ramayana is a meaningful reflection of that concept. In the past the Chera Empire was a part of Tamil nadu. Malayalam, which was separated from the original Dravidians, developed its own peculiarities.² The great epic Ramayana has been adopted by all the local cultures of India. There are performing arts in the temples of the goddesses of Kerala. They are diverse art forms and traditionally enduring cultural treasures. Kavus are the temples dedicated to goddess kali, antimahakalan, and karinkali, ayyappan, nagam. The places where kavus are associated are called

kavuvattam or plateau. *Tholpavakoothu* is one of the most important stories in the temples of Kerala. It is unknown at this time what he meant by defeat. Koothu is usually performed by members of the community such as 'vellalachetty' 'Nair'. The theme of *tholpavakoothu* is mainly the story of Ramayana from birth to coronation. Shadow pavakoothu is an art form that has played a major role in shaping the social and cultural history of Kerala. The puppet has a broad world view and historical background beyond caste and religion. The art is based on the Hindu religious consciousness. *Tholpavakoothu* is the most popular puppet show in Kerala.

A form of traditional puppetry from Kerala, *Tholpavakoothu* originated in the bhagavathi temples of palakkad districts presents the Ramayana story as told by kambar, the Tamil epic poet in the kamba Ramayana. Thol means Leather Pava means Puppet, and Koothu means Play. *Tholpavakoothu* thus means performance of a play with puppet made of leather. The theme of *tholpavakoothu* is the Ramayana story. Special play houses called Koothumadams are built in the temple premises for this purpose. The figures of the various character of the play are designed from leather and the play is performed by projecting the shadows of these leather puppets on a white screen. It is chiefly to propitiate bhadrakali that *tholpavakoothu* is performed in her temples and the devotees believe that the goddess watches the performance and would be pleased by it this believe is based upon the following legend. It was originated in the 18th or 19th century. *Tholpavakoothu* is also known as Pavakoothu- puppet play or Nizhalattam- shadow play. Kerala has made a notable contribution towards maintaining and enriching the cultural heritage of India. It has evolved through the centuries a rich and diversified culture which has nourished and become an integral part of culture of India as a whole. Most of the Indian art forms their birth and growth to religion. They are therefore intimately connected with modes of worship. There is different type of koothu. *Tholpavakoothu* it is a temple art usually performed in temples during festivals. It is enacted on a stage built near the temples .This is actually a puppet show and the dialogues of the characters or puppets are spoken by artists behind the screen. The language used is a mixture of Tamil and Sanskrit.

This shadow puppetry *tholpavakoothu* is an ancient peculiar ritualistic art form dedicated to bhagavathi, worshipped by the people of Kerala as the mother goddess, and preserved as a family tradition by the pulavars. It is amazing how this shadow puppetry is performed using the mythological figure along with the use of fire. This entertainment art is performed on a special stage called koothumadam in the temple courtyard. Puppets usually representing four characters from the Ramayana are arranged behind a long white screen in front of bright wick lamps. Thematically puppeteers have begun to introduce contemporary and secular themes to appeal to the youth. *Tholpavakoothu* performed every year in the temples of bhadrakali is regards apart of the ritualistic worship of the goddess. Now, there are 85 temples performing *tholpavakoothu* in Kerala under shri. K.k Ramachandra pulavar. *Tholpavakoothu* is also an art from that is dedicated to bhadrakali. The story goes that when bhadrakali defeated the asura [Demon] Dharik in the celestial world, Lord Rama defeated the ten- headed Lankasura, Ravana upon earth. *Tholpavakoothu* is an alternatively pavakoothu or Koothu-originated in the Palakkad districts of Kerala.

Pavakathakali is the name given to the traditional glove-puppet play of Kerala the practice of which is confined to the palakkad districts and a few surrounding places. For centuries puppetry is considered as an art form of theatre that involves manipulation of puppets as animate objects that often resemble a human or animal figure, where the puppeteers handles these puppets and enacts a story. Puppetry has remained one of the favorite art forms for the majority of states have its own unique way of show casing it. *Tholpavakoothu* is a form of shadow puppetry that is practiced in Kerala India. This is a ritual performed at the Devi temples in the Ponnani area of Palakkad. *Tholpavakoothu* is now very rarely seen in temples. *Tholpavakoothu* is still performed in many Devi temples in Palakkad taluk, Thrissur and Malappuram. They are also taking the efforts to spread the tradition by helping those in research on the subject and by holding workshops and classes to create awareness among the young and the artistically inclined. Leather puppetry shows mixed cultures of Tamil and Malayalam. *Tholpavakoothu* or the shadow puppet theatre of Kerala traces its origins more than two thousand years back. The genesis it this art lies even further back in the misty past.

A composer of the chattier community, Chinnathampi pulavar, an aficionado of the Ramayana was the first person to have adapted the verses from kamba Ramayana for shadow puppetry in Kerala apparently in the late 1700s. According to local stories, he supposedly did so to present the kamba Ramayana to ordinary people irrespective of their caste through the medium of shadow puppetry. It is said that the motivation behind this was an incident when Chinnathampi pulavar went to a Brahmins [priest- higher caste [avarna] house to attend a recitation of valmiki Ramayana [the original Sanskrit text] but was refrained from doing so because of his lower caste [savarna] status being a non- Brahmin. Such exclusion based on the caste system in many public space applied to religion, ritual, art, literature, civil service and political leadership thus, it can be said that by adopting the Tamil kamba Ramayana in shadow play, Chinnathampi pulavar's innovation revolutionized the art form to transmit a popular Brahmanical, Hindu, Sanskrit epic in its Tamil format instead to the ordinary, non-Brahmin who spoke the indigenous languages.

The general disassociation of *tholpavakoothu* from the higher caste Brahmins [priests] in the context of its creation can be perhaps traced back to the caste, lifestyles, beliefs, and scholarship of communities that were involved in shadow puppet play, and kambar's literature firstly, kambar himself was born of a caste of temples servants and musicians and the editors and commentators of kamba text were non-Brahmins communities like 'mutaliyars'. In fact the Brahmins in south India had always associated themselves and followed rituals according to the original Sanskrit Valmiki Ramayana. Secondly ,if was non- Brahmin itinerant groups that led nomadic lives from present day Tamil regions who brought the art of shadow puppetry storytelling with them to Kerala along the river Bharathappuzha. Other communities like the Nayar families in Kerala were also performers of shadow puppetry. The art forms origins are from Tamil itinerant groups from shaivist communities usually belonging to 'vellalachetti' and Nair castes who travelled performed popular Tamil folk tales through the medium of shadow puppetry along the river Bharathappuzha.

The practices of Tholpavakoothu have recently been continued by the artist by adapting evolving and bringing in changes in many ways. In *tholpavakoothu* even a slight change in the speed at which the narration of the art form is done has been a product of many other processes and changes. In the pre-modern era it can be said that *tholpavakoothu* was exclusively ritualistic and communicative in that it was a social centre of knowledge and beliefs for the people involved engaging with the practices of the art form. *Tholpavakoothu* is an art form which has been practiced since centuries. This legacy has been passed down from generation to generation. With the widespread reach of the art form overseas the craft is developing and adopting new techniques. New stories are coming up with new ways to connect with the audience. The team has performed in 40 countries so far and continues their tours during the last six months of the year. The team has also started setting market for the sale of puppets and is right now the only sellers in the game. The recently received recognition and awards is effective in spreading the world. The main objectives is to make the youth aware of the existing cultures around them and to learn appreciate respect and contribute to them in some way or the other.

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