

Ramayanam Kuttu and Kudiyyattam: A Study of Unpublished Palm leaf Manuscript of the Zamorins

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Abstract

A traditional ancient Sanskrit theatre survived in Kerala known as *Kudiyyattam*. The present understanding of *Kudiyyattam* and *Kuttu* as separate forms of art performed by the Chakyars is questioned in the light of evidence from an 18th century unpublished palm leaf manuscript of the Zamorins in the present paper. It was called *Kuttu* in the chronicle and when more than an artist perform on the stage it is called combined performance or *Kudiyyattam*. A palm leaf book on the performance of *Kuttu* from 1728 to 1730 is recorded in the palace chronicle of the Zamorin. It helps us to understand the features of this art form in the 18th century. How an art form is transformed by the royalty into a pageantry and as a tool of legitimising their power is also clearly illustrated in this chronicle. An analysis of this performance also helps us to understand the administrative machinery of a medieval polity called *Svarupam*. Thus, the study becomes a study of the political culture of medieval Kerala under the Zamorins.

Keywords

Chronicle, *Kudiyyattam*, *Kuttu*, *Ramayanam*, Zamorin

I. Introduction

Kuttu is a traditional performance art of Kerala. It is at present primarily a type of highly refined monologue where the performer narrates episodes from the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and stories from the Puranas. *Kuttu* means dance, which is at present considered as a misnomer, as facial expressions are emphasized and there is minimal choreography in the present *Kuttu* performance by the Chakyar and thus known as *Chakyar Kuttu*. In the early period it included both the dance as well as the monologues. It was only in the modern version they are understood as separate and treat as *Kuttu* and *Kudiyyattam*. The evidence of this art combined together is found in an 18th century palm leaf manuscript. It is performed in the *Koothambalam*, a place inside temples specifically designed for the performance. In *Kuttu* the Chakyar (artist) narrates the story based on a mixture of prose and poetry. *Kudiyyattam* means ‘combined acting’ in Malayalam. It is the only surviving art form that uses drama from ancient Sanskrit theatre. Both *Kudiyyattam* and *Chakyar Kuttu* originated from the ancient art form *Kuttu*, which is mentioned several times in Sangam literature, and the epigraphs of the subsequent period of Pallava, Pandyan, Chera, and Cholas.

The present paper is on a *Kuttu* and *Kudiyyattam* performance held before three centuries, recorded in a medieval chronicle. It was held in 1728-30 at Vairanellur palace of Zamorin at Ponnani, which lasted for about 458 days. We have details of this performance from the palm leaf manuscripts in the palace archives of the Zamorins. This collection of records is called *Kozhikkodan Granthavari*. It contains about 70 palm leaf books and 200 paper books, preserved in the library of Vallathol Vidyapeetham, Edappal, Malappuram, Kerala. A palm leaf book containing 86 palm leaves written on both sides are found on the performance of the Sanskrit dramas. Scholars like K.V. Krishna Ayyar and N.M. Nampoothiry used these sources for their study. Ayyar wrote a

monograph on Zamorins and several articles related to the history of Kozhikode. N.M. Nampoothiry wrote a number of articles and published a few books regarding the history and culture of the Zamorins. Though Nampoothiry has listed the palm leaf book, which we are analysing in this article, in the appendix of his book details of the book or any analysis is not made by the early scholars. I have begun the study of these palm leaf documents in late 1990s for my doctoral research and in the present paper bring out the details of the palm leaf book on *Ramayanam Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam*. The unpublished manuscript will be beneficial for those interested in medieval Kerala history and culture as well as those interested in the study of art forms like *Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam*.

The *Ramayanam Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam* were held from October 13 1728 to January 12 1730. This unpublished palm leaf account gives details of expenses and income of *Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam* performances and other matters related to the performance. The performance of three Sanskrit dramas namely Saktibhadra's *Ascharya Chudamani*, Bhasa's *Pratima* and *Abhisheka* is called *Ramayanam Kuttu*. It is a valuable source for those who study about *Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam*. It is also useful in the study of the culture of Kerala and polity of *Svarupams*.

II. The Nature and Content of Chronicle

The palm leaf book with which we are dealing in this paper is not a work on the art form. It is not written to inform us on the significance of the *Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam*. It is not concerned with the aesthetics of the Sanskrit drama or the uniqueness of *Kudiyattam* tradition. It deals with the income and expenditure of the performance. It gives the details of the drama only when it is relevant to the account of income and expenditure. Thus, the nature of this chronicle is like the statement of account related to an art performance. But even then, it divulges many aspects on the *Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam* performance of 18th century. It gives the order of performance of various acts and the rituals related to the drama. It also gives us inference on the spill over of art performance to the life and activity of the spectators. The divide between the performer and spectator blurs in certain ceremonies. The entire audience became the part of the theatre in certain ceremonies like the grand anointment of Sri Rama.

The orthographic style of the palm leaf book is also worthy to be analysed. Long vowels of e and o are not used in this period. Symbols are used to denote *panam*, fractional numbers and measures. The script used is generally Malayalam, but in certain cases it was mixed with *Kolezhuthu* script. The numbers are written in the Malayalam format. The positional value of numbers was not known in those days and thus for writing a number thousands, hundreds and tens are stated. This palm leaf book is generally well preserved, even then a few palm leaves are damaged. This book is also significant for the researchers to know about the various measures used in the medieval period like *Para*, *Azhiyan*, *Idangazhi*, *Narayam*, *Cherunazhi*, *Palam*, *Tulam*, *Muzham*, *Panamida*, *Manam*, etc. The exchange ratio of various items like cotton, coconut, areca nut, jaggery, betel, thread, coconut oil and wicks are also found in the chronicle.

III. *Ramayanam Kuttu*

In the palm leaf book, the detailed accounts of income and expenditure, the performing order of *Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam* and the rituals related with the performance, etc. are included. A comparative analysis of the performance in this chronicle and at present gives us valuable information on the way in which art forms are transformed over a period (See below, Table 1 for details). Generally, in early period more time and days were

taken for the performance of the Sanskrit dramas. For instance, in the performance of the first act of *Ascharya Chudamani* called *Parnasalankam* the present *Kramadipika* only deals with the *Purappadu* of Lakshmanan and not the *Kuttu* of Lakshmanan. But in 1728 Lakshmanan's *Kuttu* was performed for 34 days. *Ascharya Chudamani* drama is enacted at present as per the *Kramadipika* in 88 days, whereas it lasted for 262 days in 1728-30.

Table 1: Comparison of *Ascharya Chudamani* performing days in 1728-30 and at present

Sl. No.	Name of Act	Number of days performed in 1728-30	Number of days performed at present
1	<i>Act 1 - Parnasalankam</i>	55	16
2	<i>Act 2 - Surpanakhankam</i>	9	7
3	<i>Act 3 - Maya Sitankam</i>	13	15
4	<i>Act 4 - Jadayu Vadham</i>	15	7
5	<i>Act 5 - Asokavanikankam</i>	30	18
6	<i>Act 6 - Anguliyankam</i>	13	12
7	<i>Act 7 - Agnipravesankam</i>	127	13
	Total number of days	262	88

3.1. *Kuttu* performance and the death of the Zamorin

Virarayiran was the Zamorin when the *Ramayanam Kuttu* started in 1728. He died in 1729 and Manavikraman became the next Zamorin. Even during this period, the performance continued. Even during the days of the death pollution and penance related to the death the performance was continued, though in a limited way is intriguing. During these days only the *Kuttu* of Sri Rama was performed and not the *Kudiyattam*. It is evident from the table above that at present the *Kuttu* of *Agnipravesankam* in which comes the *Kuttu* of Sri Rama lasts only for 13 days. But at Vairanellur the said act was completed in 127 days. It was due to the fact that the *Kuttu* of Sri Rama lasted for 116 days. Similarly, the *Kuttu* of Hanuman was continued for three months, but no specific reason is stated for the same.

3.2. Artists of *Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam*

We have reference to the artists who have performed *Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam*. Koyappa Narana Chakyar, Parampil Unnippilla Nangyar, and Krishna Nampyar were the leading artists respectively among the Chakyar, Nangyar and Nampyar sections. Other artists mentioned among Chakyar are Rama Chakyar and Kunhunni Chakyar, among Nangyar Ittichirutevi Nangyar and among Nampyar Ittireman Nampyar and Karuvampalattu Kunhi Unni Nampyar. Two more artists Naranan and Ittinaranan are mentioned in the record, but it is not certain whether they are Chakyars or Nampyars. It is evident from the document that a maximum of six Chakyars are appearing at a time on the stage as part of the *Kudiyattam* performance. Information about the accompanying musicians are also available in the document.

The prominent artist was Koyappa Narana Chakyar. Five *panams* daily were paid to him and supporting artists. Thus, for the performance of entire 458 days 2290 *panams* are paid. In addition to it for the dress and make up an amount was paid separately. The female artist or Nangyar performed *Kudiyattam* for 18 days and she was

paid 54 *panams*. The total amount spent for the performance of *Ascharya Chudamani* was 2350 *panams*, for *Pratima* 870 *panams* and for *Abhishekam* 2038 *panams*. The grand total for the performance of three dramas was 5258 *panams*. The amount spent for rice and *dakshina* are not included in it, which was directly paid from the treasury of the Zamorin. On the last day of the performance Zamorin has gifted a purse of 1000 *panams* to Koyappa Narana Chakyar, which he redistributed among other artists. Zamorin had also gifted golden ornaments to the prominent artists.

Zamorin has sent royal letters to various locality chiefs and local magnates to bring a stipulated amount of rice and fried grain (*malar*) for the grand anointment (*valiya abhishekam*). Though we have a solitary reference to the performance of *Ramayanam Kuttu* under the Zamorins, it is evident that such performances were performed regularly as the letter to the local magnates refers that the rice and fried grain has to be brought out “as in early days”. It may not be performed annually as it took more than a year to complete the performance. Whether it was performed once in 12 years like *Mamankam* and *Taippuyam* or according to the whim and fancy of Zamorin such as *Mahamrityumjaya japam* could not be ascertained due to the lack of evidence. From the reference to the letters sent to various locality chiefs and local magnates we can enlist a large number of them under the Zamorin. They include Tinayancheri Ilayatu, Kozhikkottu Talachchenna Nayar, Tachcharavil Tirumulpad (Nilambur Kovilakam Tampuran) to Alur Janam, Rayiranellur Janam and Samudayams of Nallur and Vandur.

The royal letters of the Zamorin are in a way government orders to the officials. The letters sent in relation to the performance of *Ramayanam Kuttu* numbers 208. The income received from officials is found in the records. From the records it is clear that the payment was paid partially by certain local magnates. Since a few palm leaves are damaged, there is a lacuna in our understanding of the amount collected. However, the number of royal functionaries not paid the dues or those who partially paid is less than who paid the dues. Thus, we can assume that the functionaries contributed to the treasury of the Zamorin as demanded. Perumpulavil Erechcha Menon was the royal functionary who supervised the matters related to *Ramayanam Kuttu*. Kalathil Krishna Menon was the scribe who prepared the accounts of this performance. Thenkurichchi Menon also helped him in this. In preparing the accounts in palm leaves of *Ramayanam Kuttu* Edappalath Kittu Menon and Kalathil Ittikkarunakara Menon also helped. All these persons acted as the accountants of Ponnani *Cherikkal*.

IV. Conclusion

The last day of the performance was on 12 January 1730. The grand anointment of Sri Rama was held on that day. After *Kudiyattam* Zamorin proceeded to the stage, where *Kuttu* was performed. He held the sword and imagining escort to Sri Rama proceeded in front of the Chakyar who played the role of Sri Rama to Vairanellur temple. Zamorin entered the temple along with the Chakyar. The Chakyar still dressed as Sri Rama presented the Zamorin an arrow called *Ramasaram*, literally arrow of Rama. Afterwards the Zamorin came out of the temple holding the *Ramasaram* and mounted the palanquin. The Zamorin proceeded to Trikkavu and Vaikuntapurattu temple and returned to Vairanellur palace. The performance of *Ramayanam Kuttu* in the palace of the Zamorin may indeed be an act of piety, but it also had more to it. An art form is utilised for legitimisation of the royal power. The Zamorin gives escort to Sri Rama. Thus, the Zamorin is transformed to a retainer of the Lord. Zamorin here stressed the master-servant loyalty and relationship which is a point he wants to make clear to his subordinates. By escorting the Lord, though in the guise of an actor in an art form, it has value beyond symbolic

gesture. Though divinity is not ascribed to the king the Zamorin is regarded as the first person to accompany the Lord on earth.

The present study makes it clear that the *Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam* was not separated as art forms, but part of the *Kuttu*. Thus *Chakyar Kuttu*, *Nangyar Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam* were collectively called as *Kuttu*. Thus, the present artforms *Chakyar Kuttu*, *Nangyar Kuttu* and *Kudiyattam* treated to be separate was a later transition to the artform of *Kuttu*. The elaborate performances of *Kuttu* was also an important feature of the *Ramayanam Kuttu* performance in 1728-30.

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