

A STUDY OF TOLPAVA KOOTHU, OR SHADOW PUPPETRY, THE RITUAL ART FORMS OF PALAKKAD, KERALA

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Introduction

Shadow puppetry is a very, very old art. It has probably been around for as long as people have been making shadows. Shadow theatre has thrived in Turkey, India, Southeast Asia, Egypt, and Europe. Even today in the Indonesian islands of Bali and Java, master puppeteers perform traditional tales accompanied by live music, bringing to life many different characters in epic legends that sometimes last all night long. Many of these stories concern the origins of the moon, the constellations people see, and the mystery of the starry sky.

Objectives of the Study

- ✓ To know about the details of Tholpavakooth
- ✓ To Know the legend and origin of the Art form
- ✓ To Know the Cultural importance
- ✓ To understand nature of performance
- ✓ To know the different type of puppets

Tholpavakooth

Tholpavakoothu is a traditional art form. *Pava Koothu* 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. This belief is based on a legend which is even today current among *Pava Koothu* performers and devotees.

Tholpavakoothu or shadow puppetry performed with leather dolls for Goddess Bhadrakali was once an intrinsic part of rural worship and entertainment in Palakkad and Malappuram. But the onslaught of visual media and time constraints of modern living have made it challenging for this 2000-year-old ritual art to step out of the shadows and regain its past glory. The shadow puppet performance conveys its story to the viewers through its visual language. The aim of this research is to reveal the visual language of the gesture effects in the shadow images of the shadow puppet performance of Yogyakarta. Tholpavakoothu is considered the integration of Aryan and Dravidian Culture. In Malayalam Thol means Leather, Pava Means Doll and Koothu means Play.

Tholpavakoothu is presented for 7, 14 or 41 days as an offering at temples dedicated to Goddess Bhadrakali. The art form is usually staged late in the evening. About 180 puppets are needed for a full performance. Hence, the story of Ramayana, forms an integral part of this art form. As per the local belief, this ritual art form is watched by the goddess, who in turn blesses the community. The important qualification for a Tholpavakoothu artist is to have scholarship in our epics and be well versed in Puranas and Shastras and they also have to study the Kamba Ramayana as well as the Vedas and Puranas and to be competent enough to speak fluently on the topic. To become a puppetry artist, one must study for 15 years under a scholar. In the earlier times, women never participated in this shadow puppetry show but with time they have started to involve in this art form actively.

The theme of *Tolpava Koothu* is the *Ramayana* story, extending from the birth of Shri Rama to his coronation. It is presented through twenty-one parts on twenty-one days. The story of the *Ramayana* is specially written in twenty-one parts for *Tolpava Koothu*. This work, written partly in verse and partly in prose, is called *Ada Pattu*. *Ada* means 'acting' and *Pattu* means 'relating to'. The verse portion of *Adal Pattu* is called *Kooth Ambalam*. The *Adal Pattu*, as presented today, includes a large number of verses from the *Kamba-Ramayana*, which is the *Ramayana* written in Tamil by the great Tamil poet, Kambar. But some of the verses of Kambar have been modified to suit the special needs of *Pava Koothu* performance. The *Pava Koothu* artistes have also added their own verses wherever necessary to suit certain occasions or contexts. The verses thus added by the *Pava Koothu* artistes are mostly in Tamil. There is a mixture of Tamil and Sanskrit in a various verses. The verses and the story of the *Ramayana* were written on palm-leaves and these are carefully preserved in the houses of the puppeteers. To illustrate and interpret the meaning of the verses, the performers of *Tolpava Koothu* have from time to time added stories, episodes, explanations and dialogue. But these are not included in the palm-leaf scripts. They are orally transmitted by the teacher to the

student. In the explanations and interpretations, each performer demonstrates his originality, depending on his gifts and scholarship. The explanations of the verses and the dialogue are in a language which is a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam.

The Origin

The history of Tholpavakoothu dates back to 9th century AD. As per the myth, it is believed that Goddess Bhadrakali desired to watch the killing of Ravana by Lord Rama. She could not witness the fight since she was defending the world from the attack of the demon Darika. To perform the act of Ravana's defeat, the puppet show was organized for her. Since then the puppet show is performed in the temples of the Goddess in front of her idol. The entire story of the grand epic Ramayana was conducted through the shadow puppetry in 21 parts. The locals believe that Goddess Bhadrakali watches the plays every time it is performed in the temples and blesses them.

Nature of performance & Puppet Making

The story of Tholpavakoothu is based on puranic descriptions. The actual show starts with the invocation of Lord Ganesh and their gurus who are known as Pavadavas. The Suthradara or leading pulavar who chat and speak their Parts and thus unfold the story. The ritualistic aspects of the show and also of keeping the stage in two parts-the right side reserved for the Godly characters and left for the evil characters.

The Puppets are cut from leather made from animals like deer, goat etc without losing its transparency. Deer-skin is used to make the puppets because it is believed that deerskin has sacred and pure properties. First, a thick paste of water and ashes is spread on the hairy side of the skin and exposed to dry in the sun. The treatment helps the hairs to fall away. When the skin has been cleaned and dried, the outline of the puppet is drawn on it. The next step is shaping the puppets through careful chiselling. It is their black shadow that should fall on the screen and so the natural thickness of deer-skin is retained with care. The skin is carefully cut to ensure that the shapes, facial expressions and decorations of the puppets are accurately duplicated in their shadows. Tiny holes are punched in the leather to highlight the shadow.

The images prepared are punched for passage of light as per requirements and coloured using limited number of colours prepared by naturally. These puppets are strengthened by fixing a bamboo stick at the centre and according to the requirements of movements supposed to be made while performances. Some puppets are made with convenience to move some body portions so the artists can make feeling of a dance performance by a puppet, walking, speaking and even fighting between puppets on the screen. A screen is made using a big white cotton dhoti, and lights made up of broken coconut, oil-cotton thread made lamps are kept behind. The puppets are exposed between the lamps and screen movingly as to fall the colourful shadows on the screen.

The artists manipulate the puppets, orate the dialogues narrating story and sing as per requirements. Also they use accompanying instruments while the story is narrated dramatically in tonal gradations, laughs, cries, shouting, singing, and even running sometimes to place and change puppets according to the requirement of narration. The traditional musical instruments that are generally used are *chenda*, *maddalam*, conch, *ezhupara*, *ilathalam* etc., Most of the times more than one person is involved in entire performance, often all the family members of the artists take part in various actions like controlling lamps, handling puppets, singing, making additional sounds for special effects and in using musical instruments. All happen behind the screen which is invisible for viewers. Generally the sizes of the puppets are limited under three feet which can be easily handled behind the width and length of the screen made by dhoti.

Each important character in the story is represented by puppets in three different postures: sitting, walking and fighting. Usually only one hand of the puppet is fixed in such a manner that it can be moved and it has both the movable joints to be found in that human limb. There are differences found in size of puppets, type of leather used, size of screen, number of puppets and puppeteers, accompanying instruments and the ways and manners of presentations from place to place according to the taste of local people. Generally the stories are taken from Ramayana, but in several occasions they performed different stories as per requirements of the audience. The story of Ramayana is composed for Tholpavakoothu in 21 parts, which are presented over 21 nights.

Conclusion

This folk art form is known as Tholpavakoothu in Kerala. Tholpavakoothu is an ancient ritualistic art form dedicated to the Mother goddess Bhagavathi. Puppetry holds an important and prominent place in the various performing art forms in Kerala. Tholpavakoothu, the shadow puppet play and Pavakathakali, the glove puppet plays are also known as Pavakoothu or Nizhalkoothu. It is prevalent in Palakkad and Ponnani talukas of Kerala. This is traditionally, a dance by Pulavanmars. The pavakal or puppets are used for the performance.

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