

# Introduction

Moozhikkulam<sup>1</sup>—a village in central Kerala—is a cultural center that comprises a *Kūttambalam*, which is a *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* theater house, and a school of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* named *Nepathya*. At twilight, when the bats leave the big trees near the river to forage for fruit; the day’s garbage is burned in front of the houses, filling the air with smells of decay and smoke; the shops at the crossroads are closing; while the neighbors, who have returned from the day’s work, are now relaxing on their porches; and the evening worship at the great Lakṣmaṇa temple is on its way—at this time the lamps are lighted at the *Kūttambalam*, and a single drum beating can be heard.

*Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, the sole surviving Sanskrit theater form in India, is a sophisticated stage art that thrived in Kerala for many centuries, carried through the generations by particular temple-assistant families. So, too, it is performed until today at family events or as temple ritual and sacrifice when a patron pays for its performance to help fulfill a request. Since the middle of the twentieth century, it is also widely performed outside the temple and has seen some innovations without losing its intricacy. Over the centuries, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* developed unique ways of performing acts taken from medieval Sanskrit dramas designed to entice the gods and other protagonists of the play to the *Kūttambalam*, and there, on-stage, to awaken a living world. *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*’s exceptional complexity, its delicate process of becoming, and its transformative capacity are the focus of this book.

Behind the stage, in the “green room,” or *Nepathya*—the special room where the actors and actresses get ready—preparations start a few hours before the performance. A lamp is lit, and the actors tie a red band across their foreheads. Students of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* are

busy rolling many cotton balls, mixing rice paste to stick on the actor's legs, and preparing the costumes; the makeup artist cuts out pieces of white glossy paper for the beards, and then paint intricate masks on the actors' faces, gluing beards on those who play heroes, and cotton balls on those who are to be monkeys; the drummers check the brass *milāvou* drums, and two drummers carry each of these heavy drums to the stage, securing them on their stands. Finally, the lamps are filled with oil, and the chairs and mats for the audience are spread out in front of the stage. After two lamps—one at the entrance to the *Kūttambalam* and the other on stage—are lighted with a flame from the lamp in the “green room,” a bare-chested young drummer mounts the drum stand and starts beating his enthralling rhythm, letting everyone know that the day's *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance is about to begin—and that all are welcome.

Then the gods are summoned via offerings, chanting, and dance (*kriyā*). The universe is now ready, nothing is inert, everything is sentient and active within the *Kūttambalam*. As the performance unfolds, going deeper into the night, deeper into the drama, changes occur that are inseparably cognitive, somatic, emotional, totalizing, irresistible, embodied, and personalized. Space is captured by movement as the human body and its senses are drowned in overwhelming stimuli that enable all at the *Kūttambalam* to enter the cosmos created on stage. Breaching the borders between humans and gods, between the sentient and the inert, between the stage and the audience, and also between the singular parts of the human body, so that seeing and hearing become muddled and we can see the drumbeat and listen to the *mudrā* words with our eyes. Movement and sound are continuously tying knots between personae and worlds, interconnecting in elaborate ways parts of a new and inescapable reality, one that is ready for a transformation. Through manifold repetitions of sound, sight, smell, and movement, hidden powers are awakened, activated by newly formed somatic, emotional, and cognitive combinations, which permit an entire new existence to appear.

As temple worship, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* has been performed by members of two matrilineal temple assistant castes, and although today *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance outside the temple grounds includes trained actors and drummers from other castes, the performance is

replete with elements of ritual such as invocations of the gods and offerings to them. Delivering the text in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is done mainly through elaborate *mudrā* gestures that include the grammatical parts of the sentence; the actors also communicate the text by moving their eyes in every direction and shaking their eyebrows and cheeks—their entire body is engaged in relating the story. Each of the drama's phrases is repeated many times in different forms: chanting, telling with *mudrā* gestures, playing out, or even “reciting” with the eyes alone. Because of these elaborations and repetitions, a few hours of each of many nights are necessary to complete a single act of a play.

Most of the classic Sanskrit dramas presented on the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* stage tell stories taken from the great Indian epics. The protagonists often change roles to become other entities, gods, goddesses, demons, demonesses, men, women, animals, and even objects such as hair or feather, with no props or change of costume. This *kūttu* or play tradition comprises three forms: the *Naṅṅyārkkūttu*—a single actress enacting the story of Kṛṣṇa; the *Cākyārkkūttu*, in which a single actor orally recounts the stories of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Malayalam; and *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, in which both actors and actresses perform together in costume.

The actors do not simply imitate everyday behavior, since no one would ordinarily talk in *mudrā* gestures<sup>2</sup> or express emotion by shaking the cheeks; rather, mundane behavior on the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* stage is purposely and systematically altered so that another mode of life may emerge. The actors do not stand in for the protagonists of the play, nor do they perform representation, “as if” they were those gods or demons; instead, they temporarily, albeit incompletely, become those protagonists. The stories unfolding on stage do not symbolize what occurred elsewhere in the playwright's imagination, or at some mythical time; rather, the dramas are vehicles that mix mundane life with the reality coming into being on stage.

This is why, although clearly a stage performance, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is not theater as we usually think of it. It sets into motion an actual alternative world that all at the *Kūttambalam*—including the audience—live in for the duration of the performance. The amalgamated reality generated in the *Kūttambalam*—mixing the mundane with the reality of the play—engages everyone, both when they are inside the *Kūttambalam* and when they are elsewhere. The drumbeat is

overwhelming, seeping into one's living outside the *Kūttambalam* during waking hours and sleep alike. Thoughts, dreams, sensations, modes of consciousness, and somaticity are somewhat changed to usher all into a world made differently.

*Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is a specific way-of-doing, it is a practice, and its solutions to creating an alternative reality and to generating meaning are not abstract but practical ones. Analyzing it thus begins with practice itself: by noting the exact ways in which *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is organized and performed in the small space of the stage, within the larger space of the *Kūttambalam*, in the village of Moozhikkulam, and in the world at large.

The bibliography concerning *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is rich and varied. Some authors describe *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* in detail (Paniker 1992; Venu 2002; Gopalakrishnan 2011; Madhavan 2012; Oberlin and Shulman 2019; Narayanan 2022). Others concentrate on *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* as theater, and as part of the Indian theater heritage (Rajagopalan 1974a; Enros Pragna 1981; Richmond and Richmond 1985; Richmond 1990a, 1990b; Daugherty 2004; Johan 2014). Yet others focus on *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* as part of Indian folklore and, as such, designated as world heritage (Sullivan 2009; Lowthorp 2013a, 2013b, 2017, 2020). Some scholars also research *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* from a historical perspective (Rajagopalan 1987; Sullivan 1997; DuComb 2007; Rajendran 2012; Moser 2013, 2014).

Since *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is the only surviving Sanskrit theater presenting classic Sanskrit text and stories, many scholars highlight the Sanskrit verses and drama (Unni 1990; Moser-Achuthath 1999–2000; Shulman 2022). *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is also studied as a ritual (Narayanan 2006; Sullivan 2010, 2011; Johan 2017; Margi 2015; Shulman 2020). Moreover, some scholars give their attention to the unique features of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, such as *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* being a rare form of classic theater in which women act on stage (Paniker 1992; Daugherty 1996; Moser 2008, 2011; Johan 2011a; Lowthorp 2016); other singular features include drums, mudrā gestures, and facial expression (Rajagopalan 1968, 1974b; Jones 1984; Gopalakrishnan 2006; Pacciolla 2021). For a more comprehensive bibliography, see Moser (2011b).

I drew ample information as well as inspiration from all these publications. Yet since my perspective concerning *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is markedly anthropological, my main source stems from fieldwork—

that is, encounters, interactions, and experiences in the field itself. Thus, many important aspects of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* I will mention only in passing here, in particular the history of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, its poetry, and its temple performances.

Following in the footsteps of Don Handelman, I endeavor to drive symbolic anthropology beyond symbolism into the affects of practice in its own right and through this to explore the potentialities embedded in cultural events. Emphasizing, in the first instance, what is actually happening within the event itself—namely, the interactions among participants, and the setting within which this culturally informed entity unfolds. Through the practices adopted and those discarded, that also recursively organize the setting of an event, and through the degrees of its detachment from its social surrounding, an event, its intensity, and its affect are all formed.

Thus, too, through the meticulous ways in which *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is put together, it develops the capacity to transport life away from the mundane.

I began exploring these kinds of transformative dynamics in Japanese martial art (Bar-On Cohen 2006, 2007, 2009, 2014) only to discover that *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* exploits them more grandly. *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is a fantastically complex, sophisticated, layered, and traditionally informed way-of-doing—a way of toiling at amassing and perfecting ways of materializing a world where gods, demons, and mythical heroes live, while taking the audience into those other realities as they are emerging. Moreover, this feat is achieved without possession, indeed with only a slight change in modes of consciousness.

I conducted anthropological fieldwork on *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* on six occasions between 2012 and 2019 at several sites, mainly in Ernakulam, in central Kerala. I watched numerous hours of performance, over many days, and had the good fortune to live alongside and to befriend many actors and drummers, especially at Nephatha, sharing food and laughs with them, and testing their patience with my requests for information.

To introduce some of the basic features of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, I will describe a short scene, a story from the *Rāmāyaṇa* featuring Rāvaṇa, the mighty demon-king of Lanka. The scene, one that can be watched on YouTube, takes about fifteen minutes.

A Scene from *Kailāsoddhāra*

The actor, Kalamandalam Sivan Namboodiri, in the costume of Rāvaṇa, is performing the *Kailāsoddhāraṇam*.<sup>3</sup> Translations from Sanskrit are cited here as they appear in the captions of the recording: see [www.indiavideo.org/kerala/arts/kutiyattam-part-1-3900.php#Desc](http://www.indiavideo.org/kerala/arts/kutiyattam-part-1-3900.php#Desc).

The stage is empty apart from a stool and a three-wicked lamp, both in the middle of the stage in front of the actor. At the back of the stage, three bare-chested drummers are playing, and on the side of the stage sits the *Nāṅṅyār*—the female actress—dressed in a white sari playing a small cymbal. The actor, dressed as Rāvaṇa—the demon-king of Lanka—sits on the stool holding a sword. Thoughtful, in his royal splendor, he is contemplating the curse cast upon him after he lifted mount Kailāsa, Śiva’s abode. His face is entirely painted in vivid green, his eyes outlined in black; red patches mark out his forehead, nose, mouth, and neck; a white ball is attached to his nose; another white ball covers his “third eye” in the middle of his forehead; white paper is glued to his chin as a beard; and the whites of his eyes are dyed red. His face is mask-like, a living mask. Unlike a rigid mask, this makeup mask is capable of a multitude of expressions as the eyes, mouth, eyebrows, cheeks, and forehead are visibly moving and jumping.

Rāvaṇa sits there unmoving for a few seconds in a majestic pose, the gilded parts of his costume glittering in the flickering light of the lamp in front of him. The lamp focuses both the actor’s and the audience’s gaze.<sup>4</sup> He is a king. The drums keep their urgent rhythm. Now he slowly gets up to put the sword down in front of him and sits back on the stool. He fans himself with the edges of his shawl, performing wide, slow, circular movements with his right hand, with his left, and then with both hands. Now he is returning to his thoughts, the drums continuing their beat but quieting into the background of his musing. Rāvaṇa looks straight ahead, slowly rocking back and forth twice, and then moving his gaze downward, shaking his head in disbelief, or perhaps in regret. Every slight movement is clearly noticeable once the stable posture has been established.

Now he starts to talk, lifting both hands forward, his outward palms moving in a circle, and he throws his right hand backward,

signaling the drummers to stop playing. Then he chants in Sanskrit. The artificial fangs in his mouth are showing as he accompanies his chanting with *mudrā* gestures, saying: “I have conquered in battle the three worlds inhabited by the Devas [gods] and the Asuras [demons], the same me, a man of great pride. Not only that, I have opposed Mount Kailāsa, the abode of Lord [Śiva] and his servant demons. I have shaken them and the Devi [Pārvatī]. I have received from him [Śiva] a boon as a token of his appreciation. Then Sri Pārvatī and Nandikēśvara [the bull Nandi] put curses on me for insulting them—two curses. In the deceitful guise of a monkey, have my curses come to claim me?” After the chanting, the drummers resume their playing, and Rāvaṇa recites the sentence again, now using only *mudrā* gestures, his hands traveling around his torso in different trajectories, his fingers folding and extending with great dexterity, changing positions and rhythm, while his gaze follows his hands. However, in the *mudrā* gesture rendition of the text, he adds: “How is that?,” which is an invitation to retell the chain of events that resulted in the lifting of the mountain and the curses, expressed only in *mudrā* gestures with no chanting.

Rāvaṇa starts by describing his morning. His morning bath, prayer, and meal, and then, entering the ostentatious royal court in Lanka, he sits on his throne. Some of the words are rendered in acting. We can see Rāvaṇa shuddering in pleasure when the bathwater drips on his back, putting his hands together, moving to and fro in prayer, and eating out of the palm of his hand. The drums change their rhythm to accentuate the activities, imitating the sound of dripping water and that of the pleasurable shudder. Space is also delineated by the hands in movement—the court is drawn in the air as a square, while the throne is drawn in front of him, and parasols above his head are round; the white whisks fanned by demonesses are shown in wide waves of both hands. Once the court is established, all the court attendants perform obeisance to their king.

Then Rāvaṇa stops for a moment, leaning slightly to the side, listening—someone is coming. The god Vaiśrāvaṇa’s messenger is approaching. Rāvaṇa hears the messenger bringing him presents of silk and weapons and delivering the god’s request. His master Vaiśrāvaṇa asks Rāvaṇa to stop persecuting the Devas (the gods). Immediately, Rāvaṇa stands up, picks up his sword, cuts off the



messenger's head, and swings it away with a great movement. Now Rāvaṇa and his army wage war against Vaiśrāvaṇa. He sees Vaiśrāvaṇa himself approaching, riding his chariot. Rāvaṇa gets angry, snatches the god from his vehicle, and is about to behead him as well, but then he thinks better of it and tosses him away. We see Rāvaṇa thinking and swinging Vaisrāvaṇa until he throws him into the distance.

I would like to point out a few of the remarkable traits of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* that surface in this scene. Since the events in which Rāvaṇa takes part were dramatized from the great Indian epic the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the stories are well known to the audience, yet every phrase and every act is repeated many times. The chanting is doubled with the *mudrā* gestures, and the *mudrā* gestures, in turn, are repeated and accompanied by acting. Repetition is everywhere and pervasive. Rāvaṇa on the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* stage creates a vital and vibrant world, replete with everything necessary for a world to function. Although objects (throne, fans, whisks), sentiments (thoughtfulness, regret, anger), personae (attendants, messenger, Vaishrāvaṇa), events, and space itself seem ephemeral—since they are made of body movements—they generate a concrete and dynamic actuality.

The single actor dressed as the mighty Rāvaṇa is alone on stage; he changes roles to embody his attendants and the messenger, alternating persona in the blink of an eye. Questions such as “How is that?” are crossroads that shift the course of the story, taking Rāvaṇa into another time and space. The objects, entities, and spaces become visible to the audience and exist on stage until the entire world is dismantled many days later. A densification of reality in the *Kūttambalam* occurs as a result of the constant repetitions, questions, and alterations in personae, as the actor dressed in the same costume changes roles and becomes one protagonist after another, also changing through time and in space over the scores of nights necessary to perform just one single act.

While sitting on his throne, Rāvaṇa is taken back and takes us with him to the memory of his encounter with Vaiśrāvaṇa, thus thickening time to what Shulman (2016a, 2022) calls “thick present,” since the unfolding on stage “is almost always a series of past moments embedded as future from within a deeper past.” We see Rāvaṇa musing on an event, the consequences of which have



yet to unfold. He lifted Mount Kailāsa and was cursed for doing so; the consequences of that act and the curses that followed will concretize later, when his army will be defeated by an army of monkeys. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as well as in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, such connections between distant times and events defy linearity and generate multifaceted recursive relations between cause and effect, at times reversing their role and at others simply nullifying the effect of a cause altogether. Everything is added; nothing disappears. Events become nestled within other events, places within places, and times go back and forth, all enveloped in the subtle variations in drumbeat, acquiring depth.

Another feature of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* that surfaces in this snippet is a moment of sudden reflexivity or realization. In this moment, the ruthless demon Rāvaṇa changes his mind about killing Vaiśrāvaṇa and tosses him away instead. Rāvaṇa recognizes himself, or parts of himself, in the god Vaiśrāvaṇa, since Vaiśrāvaṇa is an avatar of Rāvaṇa; here two avatars exist concomitantly, meeting and fighting. The gods, both in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and on the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* stage, seem to be forgetful, and such moments of reflexivity—when they (Rāma, the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Hanūman the monkey-god) are made to recognize themselves, their past, and the extent of their power—become pivotal driving forces in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. Those powerful entities forget and must be reminded time and again who they are, what they are capable of, and what they must do to fulfill their cosmic role, and through these reminders they come into themselves.

### *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*—Anthropological Questions

Much of symbolic anthropology looks, first and foremost, for the congruences between social life and its representation in art or ritual, and the role those events may play within that sociality. For such an analysis, performance and ritual serve a purpose—they are often considered ways to alleviate tensions, to criticize social order, or simply to vent grievances. To show such links, symbolic anthropologists search for the beliefs that motivate behaviors, frequently looking for the binary oppositions at the root of such conflicts and motivations.

Ultimately, such attitudes explain cultural and religious phenomena through sociality alone without looking for the creative, generative force embedded in the events, as they are organized, in their own right. Moreover, they do not consider invisible forces such as gods, demons, or the outcome of sacrifice as having any kind of actual (real) existence. Naturally, too, such perspectives do not consider ways in which invisible forces are made to act. However, all of these suppositions—the role that cultural events necessarily play in sociality, symbolic reckoning, the requirement of belief itself, binary oppositions, the impossibility of (real) action by invisible forces—must be shown in the field and not assumed in advance.

Another scene that highlights well the consistency of the reality germinating on the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* stage is Lakṣmaṇa building a hut for Rāma and his wife Sītā. This scene, which occurs often on the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* stage, demands considerable effort and skill to perform. The royal human-cum-divine couple is living in exile, wandering the wilderness. Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma's loyal brother, who accompanies them, builds a hut—the *Parṇa-śālā*—to protect the couple. While carefully building the *Parṇa-śālā* on stage, Lakṣmaṇa is not using organic branches, twigs, leaves, and fragrant flowers; nonetheless, the hut he is building is real, made of branches, twigs, leaves, and fragrant flowers, which materialize through movement alone. He is digging holes to plant the poles that will hold up the hut; his digging is not symbolic, for he is not merely communicating “digging.” He does not move on to something else once we, the audience, understand what he is doing; he meticulously digs one hole after another until all four are done; he is not concerned that the audience may find a quadruple repetition of the same movement tedious; this is because if he does not dig all four holes, and plant all four poles, the structure—a temple for divinities to live in—will not hold.

Symbols are quintessentially different in nature from true, real things. They stand instead of those real things to signify them; their working is based on an unbreachable, ontological gap between real reality and communicating its meaning. Moreover, symbols communicate meaning through reduction, foregoing differences. Thus, symbols can only represent a static, partial image of the cluttered, ever-evolving lived world, and, therefore, they cannot

generate a living reality. As mentioned, much of the anthropology that analyzes symbols sees extensive efforts to tease meaning in ritual and art by analyzing the juxtapositions of symbols and the social reality represented by them. Yet symbols and representation are one culturally specific method among many of communicating meaning and making sense; they certainly do not trace the only way; the use of symbols is by no means universal (e.g., see Kapferer 2004, 2006, 2010; Handelman 2013). Defying symbols, causality and linearity are key to the workings of cultural dynamics embedded in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, and thus, too, to their anthropological analysis.

In *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, acting in the world and producing meaning are achieved concomitantly, inseparably, and recursively, so that no ontological gap opens up between things in the world and their existence in the *Kūttambalam*. To accomplish this, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* employs a wide array of cultural dynamics that can avoid generating a gap between the occurrences on stage and what they actually do. Specific methods are harnessed on stage to disrupt the mundane relations between things-in-the-world and rearranging them; new connections are then established and sent on their trajectories, taking on lives of their own.

This is why my main anthropological questions concern three elements: the search for the cultural dynamics that enable keeping the performance close to doing rather than to representing so that emergence can occur; the organizing properties embedded in practice (Venkatesan 2020); and the *modes d'emploi* that this practice carries within itself. Cultural dynamics are not abstract principles, nor are they theoretical guidelines; rather, they are revealed only by following practice itself, within unfolding processes. Through these processes, complex, flexible, adaptive connections are set into motion and transmitted, mainly from body to body. These connections are made of traditional knowledge, inculcated in the actors' bodies from childhood. Moreover, the actors use imaginative creativity to trigger connections capable of activating systems of know-how that awaken dynamics embedded in the world. These dynamics also generate that self-same world.

Observing *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* in the attempt to discern the cultural dynamics that operate this form of theater, "how" questions are central and critical. How does this new reality come to life and survive? Even scrutinizing the short scene from *Kailāsodhāraṇam*,

and then Lakṣmaṇa's building of the *Parṇa-sālā*, already calls up a multitude of questions. How do the empty stage, the female Nāṇṇiyārs, the mudrā gestures, the drummers, the three-wicked lamp, and the living, expressive mask of Rāvaṇa shape *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*? How do they contribute to generating an alternative mode of life that can last days or even several weeks? What sort of reality comes into existence? How does it work and how is it kept alive? How are the body, its faculties and potentialities—the muscles, senses, modes of consciousness—engaged in creating such change? What happens to bodies and selves while living this extraordinary existence? Moreover, this tradition is no less a temple ritual and sacrifice in which the actors become the heroes of the great epic in an effort to entice the gods to join in at the *Kūttambalam* and grant a request. So, what can *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* do, and what transformation does it yield?

Furthermore, what do the frequent questions asked on stage contribute as they send the protagonists into other events, times, and places, into the very “thickening” of the present? What does the multitude of repetitions accomplish? What cultural, semiotic, somatic, and ritual dynamics are employed to yield the unobstructed flow between aspects of the world? How does *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* resonate with the audience, with the *Rāmāyaṇa* of the Sanskrit play, with past generations of actors, drummers, and actresses who performed *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* as a ritual in temples? On the other hand, how did *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* modernize, secularize, and globalize to the point that—like the scene described here—it can be watched worldwide on YouTube?

More generally, how can practice in its own right (Handelman 2004b) generate an alternative way of acting, one that concomitantly communicates meaning? How can this way of acting overcome what is usually considered the unbreachable semiotic gap, as Artaud (1964) famously put it, between reality and its double? What sort of connections can be established to avoid representation as well as their logical kin, such as linearity and causality? How does this elaborate way-of-doing challenge clear distinctions between imagination and reality, and more specifically, how can movement and imagination become materials for actual sophisticated practices employed to generate alternative lived-in-worlds?<sup>25</sup> All of this, as I would like to show, can be achieved through that which I term *inclusiveness*.

## Building an “Inclusive” World in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*

To animate its reality, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* actively, purposely, and consistently endeavors to unravel any gap that may arise between abstraction and concreteness, between reality and its representation, among the different faculties of the body, and between humans and non-humans.<sup>6</sup> It sets into motion a complex endeavor that can bring forth a visceral and savory world, one that disseminates freshness and animation.

To bring to life a real reality through movement, albeit an ephemeral one, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* creates an “inclusive” world. Inclusive cultural dynamics are often called non-dual, and indeed they shun duality. However, negating the dual by calling it “non-dual” not only declares the dual as the standard but, more importantly, does not indicate what inclusion and non-duality, or rather a-duality, are capable of in a positive, constructive way.<sup>7</sup>

We are accustomed to worlds that promote exclusivity rather than inclusivity, worlds that seek stability to enable abstraction as a higher or meta level, one deemed of greater complexity and value than is materiality—moreover, worlds that sustain a clear gap between representations and the real world. Yet the dynamics that generate exclusivity, that enable these neat organizations, must constantly compile any emerging differences into neat, stable, understandable, abstract terms. To fix them into place, to keep them from moving—as time and life constantly do—differences must be subdued, subjected to the generalizations of identity, and piled into agglomerations.<sup>8</sup> Thus, repetitions, slight modifications, and accidental processes are excluded and collapsed into clear-cut categories and codes. Relying solely on linearity, the cultural dynamics of exclusivity treat iterations as redundancies, tedious noise, decoration, or as straightforward detritus. Such traditions employ only one semiotic tool, that of representation, and reject—even patronize—all other options (see also Deleuze 1994<sup>9</sup>; Xin 2012).

Inclusive cosmologies combat exclusions by vigorously working to retain as many iterations and potentialities as possible. They largely depend on practice, on actual movement, vigorously toiling to control and collect as many potential repetitions of that practice as possible, and, thus, to avoid the crystallization of gaps. Yet as a consequence, an inclusive world is vulnerable, unsteady, and

susceptible to erosion. Whereas an exclusive system may crumble due to variations generated through the movement of life, the erosion of an inclusive system arises from inertia, from the very obstruction of movement. Inclusive worlds abhor stasis, which yields chaos (Handelman and Lindquist 2011: 25–26; Handelman and Shulman 1997, 2004). Therefore, a constant effort is required to build and sustain a world of movement.

Nevertheless, inclusivity is not the simple contrary of exclusivity. Whereas exclusivity employs just one way-of-doing, that of linearity, inclusive cosmologies do not exclude any way-of-doing. Despite the aversion toward compilations and approximations, inclusive worlds may also include snippets of linearity, causality, and representation, which are no more than an option within a myriad of perspectives, without awarding them precedence over other ways of communicating and world-building.

While systems based on exclusion refer to something outside themselves, perhaps a “meta-level,” that encompasses them, inclusive worlds refer to nothing outside themselves. They grow out of their own material, expanding and shrinking, intensifying and rarifying. Handelman calls such a world intra-grated (in my terms, inclusive), as opposed to integrated (in my terms, exclusive). While integrated worlds are held together by an external carapace, a “meta-level,” (often a single god) closing off a series of well-partitioned hierarchical levels, an intra-grated world is held together from its interiority through synergetic relations between the parts within the whole (Handelman 2014a: 96; Handelman and Lindquist 2011).

In *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, the multiplicity of vantage points does not include any “meta” position. Nothing encompasses the *Kūṭṭam-balam* from outside itself; the gods are within, and nothing is more abstract than the performance itself—it is self-referential, referring to nothing outside itself (Handelman 2014: 98). *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is inclusive in all domains: cosmological, social, and somatic. Storytelling in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* meanders the world to supply more and more events, embracing countless repetitions that lead to no particular end or climax but instead create whirls within whirls, establishing the story on multiple levels of existence. Such practice depends on complex traditions developed over centuries.

To construct, sustain, and operate a world of inclusion, a relatively enclosed bubble or life-pocket must be created—a nearly secluded chamber including everything necessary for it to function continuously within itself. Namely, an inclusive practice must concentrate on one aspect of life and burrow into it to include as many iterations as possible to near-perfection while concomitantly distancing itself from life outside its confines. Moreover, only separation from mundane living can ensure its capacity to include everything within that life-pocket. This is why inclusive worlds are always busy severing ties, disregarding everything not included in the practice at hand, to exploit to the fullest the potentialities of inclusion, delving into every aspect of a certain domain or activity.

When the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* actors tie on their headbands at the beginning of preparations for the performance, this act renders them immune to ritual pollution. The headband covers the *ucci* (understood as the highest orifice in the cranium) and is an act of separation, one severing social, familial, and religious ties and obligations. While gently separating from mundane living, by entering the secluded life-pocket of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, the actors and actresses ensure protection against human fragility stemming from sociality that may result in disruption and ritual pollution.<sup>10</sup>

Many Indian worlds are inclusive life-pockets (Handelman and Shulman 2004); thus, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is part of a widespread tradition, one that relies more heavily on what Ramanujan (1989) calls unique context-sensitive relational understandings rather than context-free generalization or universals.

In a world made of actual, physical material, maintaining the endless versions, iterations, and repetitions will engender such density and clutter that it will soon become impossible to contain; too many objects cannot fit into a three-dimensional space and into linear time. Yet since the entities and events on the *Kūttambalam* stage are made of *movement*, they can fill space and time, without overflowing them, into borderless depth. *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* preserves everything that is created on stage for the duration of the performance; whatever is meandering within the *Kūttambalam* is carefully collected. The innumerable repetitions deepen the world as it comes to be—open-ended, never complete.



## How Body Generates a World

The world of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* depends for its existence on a myriad of both large and minute body movements. The potentialities of the human body center both the training of the actors and the performances themselves.

When I started thinking in anthropological terms, my main question quickly became the following: how are worlds of meaning formed through culturally informed somatic practices, those centered on the living, moving, perceiving, thinking, and feeling human body?<sup>11</sup> I looked at delineated life-pockets such as martial arts—karate, aikidō, kyūdo (Japanese archery), sumo, and Israeli close combat—and the different ways in which each shapes a world of meaning. Although they are all concerned with embodied fighting, each may generate a radically different way-of-doing, ways based on alternative cosmologies actually formed through practice (e.g., Bar-On Cohen 2006, 2012, 2014, 2021).

These practices determine the body's faculties and potentialities and how they interrelate. Thus, through the specific ways of organizing space and time and through the choice of exercises, while forgoing alternative options, these worlds also recursively form the actual living body of the participants. As a result of long years of training, the body itself becomes stronger, more sensitive and mindful, and more adept in using those faculties and potentialities. Body practice thus shapes a world, not as part of our consciousness alone, but also by becoming integral to the world's materiality, just as cooking, eating, procreating, and making tools are all shaped by the body and recursively shape capacities, forms, and the environment itself.

## India, Practice, and Body

To analyze *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, I firmly stand on the broad shoulders of two thinkers: Anthropologist Don Handelman and Indologist David Shulman.

In his work (specifically on *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*), Shulman (2022) allows the reader to savor the lush and formidable potentialities embedded in South Indian creativity—in stories, poetry, drama,

language, and thought—to reveal the animated character of Indian cosmology. Masks, dreams, games, words, and even grammar all come alive to become active and transformative. Meanwhile, the clear distinctions between real reality and the affects of culture become blurred. And, the world reveals unexpected facets flowing from human creativity, and since imagination becomes sentient, it enables challenging the directionality of causality, linearity, and time.

Handelman suggests that diverse modes of framing are culturally employed to determine the potentialities embedded in the interface between parts of a world, and, thus too, its cosmology. In other words, a particular cosmos comes to be through modes of fashioning frames and the interactions among its parts, and that same cosmos is constructed through those same formations. Thus, there is no delay or separation between an abstract blueprint or intention and its emergence in practice; both come to be together and nourish one another.

By suggesting to carefully observe ritual, art, and other cultural events, in their own right, Handelman opens a way of following the making of a cosmology not out of principles or discourse but as emerging out of the way it is put together. Such an approach favors “how” questions over “why” questions. Looking closely in the first instance at practice as it is done permits to glimpse the emic point of view—without prior premises, whether theoretical or concerning the social context in which a practice thrives. And so, too, to keep a distance from the assumptions that the anthropologist brings to her analysis from her own cultural restraints and biases. That is why Handelman’s suggestion to look at practice in its own right is not simply a methodological one (Shapiro 2015); it is a basis for analysis, and for anthropology itself.

In my research of martial arts, as well as *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, I engaged with Handelman and Shulman to see how the most intricate tool available to us—the human body—in all of its potentialities and aspects is used to generate and sustain different realities. In this respect, I am also following in the footsteps of some of the anthropologists who consider the centrality of the body itself as actively promoting certain cosmologies. One such anthropologist is Joseph Alter, who shows that in India the body is porous vis-à-vis its environment, and that body practice and body images play a central role within Indian social orderings, culture, and politics

(Alter 1992, 2000). Faculties of the body often considered distinct from each other are inseparably linked. Thus, wrestlers in northern India keep themselves strong and pure; they control their food intake, their semen, and other bodily functions. They avoid street food, which might pollute their bodies because it could contain bad emotions. Alter (1994, 1996) stresses the importance of sexual restraint and the upkeep of the body in Gandhi's thought and its profound influence on modernized India and its politics, as well as the importance of yoga and the yogic body in the Indian political arena (2004).

Ethnomusicologist Steven Friedson looks into how drumming and music in African ritual can generate an alternative reality and bring the gods into the world (Friedson 1996, 2009). He shows that one prevalent African rhythm among the Tumbuka in Northern Malawi is a mix of a beat of three and a beat of four, creating a confusing and hypnotic rhythm—a “gestalt”-switch similar to the optical illusion of an old woman who is also a young woman, depending on how you concentrate your gaze on the drawing. This chimera can reveal the gods to the ritualists. Another ethnomusicologist, Steven Feld (1996, 2012), introduces “the anthropology of sound” (2012: xxvii). Feld shows how body potentialities shape the environment. The Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea have developed intimate relations with sounds from their environment and culture, such as water, birdsong, and women weeping, going beyond sung songs that convey emotion to encompass geographical soundscapes, particularly by discerning different sounds of water as they navigate the land.

These anthropologists do not relate to the body as a metaphor or as a source of symbols, but to the amazing potentialities that the body can create when painstakingly formed to become a cosmogenic tool.

### Structure of the Book

The first chapter presents both the traditional organization of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and the challenges it faces in today's social reality. Modernization has dramatically altered lifestyles in Kerala, and in order to allow its preservation under new conditions, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*

too needed to change and adapt. Nevertheless, despite efforts to perform *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* out of the temple, to open its ranks to new castes, to add female roles, to update costumes, and more, the survival of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is still threatened. In particular, the performances extending over many nights, both within and outside the temple, became rare and far apart (Johan 2011b.). Because of its unique features, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* no longer draws new audiences. The ranks of those who appreciate the slow pace of the performances, and those who can even understand the *mudrā* words, are dwindling. These changes in social ordering present challenges to Nepathya as a family-centered school, as well as to other schools, especially since the prolonged and intense training for the actors over many years does not promise a potential livelihood. This chapter also introduces the difficulties of understanding and analyzing *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, since it cannot be analyzed solely as theater.

The second chapter delves deeper into the performance itself. It describes in detail an extraordinary performance of the *Aṅgulīyāṅkam*, the sixth act of the play “the Wondrous Head-Jewel,” featuring the heroes of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In the *Aṅgulīyāṅkam*, for twenty-eight straight nights a single actor performs in the costume of the monkey-god and messenger Hanūman. This performance embodies many of the potentialities of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, with its somatic and sensual diversity. The royal couple-cum-deities Sītā and Rāma are living in exile in the forest when Sītā—tricked through *māyā* (magical illusion) by Rāvaṇa the demon king of Lanka—is abducted. The act unfolds while Hanūman the monkey messenger is hiding inside a tree in Rāvaṇa’s *aśōka* garden, where Sītā is imprisoned. Hanūman is carrying a message to Sītā from her husband Rāma in the form of a magic ring (the *Aṅgulīyāṅkam*). While Sītā is contemplating ending her life, Hanūman is waiting for an opportunity to give her the ring, a ring that allows *māyā* to be discerned from “real” reality. As Hanūman takes on a myriad of roles, the performance allows the forming of a rich reality existing alongside the mundane one.

The third chapter makes use of the features revealed mainly through the *Aṅgulīyāṅkam* to suggest theoretical tools for understanding *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. The chapter relates to the cultural dynamics of storytelling in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and how they push toward creating and shaping an inclusive world. The stories told on stage are

famous and well known to the audience, so revealing the plot is not the goal of their telling. The more profound accomplishment of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is generating a smooth, unobstructed world through particular cultural dynamics that are employed to accomplish this feat. Among the dynamics generated on stage, some especially stand out: the *negative* that creates space, the *interrogative* that fills that space, and *repetition* that brings the events to life and unleashes a world of intensities comprised of emotional tenors.

The fourth chapter engages with energizing the world through *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* through two cases of female power injecting into the world. The first is the aftermath of the mutilation of the mighty female demon Śūrpaṅkhā. During a battle in the sky, Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma's loyal brother, cuts off Śūrpaṅkhā's breasts and nose. Shamed, hurt and vengeful, she appears in the *Kūttambalam*, spewing her blood in every direction, rendering the entire world red. In the second case of female energy, its dissemination pours out of the ordeal of fire undergone by the lovely goddess-cum-woman Sītā. She walks into a funeral pyre as if it were refreshing water, thereby casting a golden hue throughout the world and opening both the domain of the gods and the dead to humans. Both the urgent energizing and dangerousness of female energy unleashed by the demoness's mutilation and the serene and harmonious energy released by Sītā's ordeal of fire are necessary for the well-being of the world.

The fifth chapter addresses an ancient ritual recently revived after a hiatus of 150 years—the *Cūṭala-k-kūttu*. The ritual is performed by an actress, a Naṅṅyār performing *Naṅṅyārkūttu*, at the cremation ground on the property of a Brahmin (Nampūdiri) family, for a deceased Brahmin. Many conditions must be met for the ritual to be called forth, particularly that the deceased must have performed the grand fire ritual, the *Agnicayana*, during his lifetime. The event is thus a convergence of two rituals—the *Cūṭala-k-kūttu* and the *Agnicayana*—that took place years earlier. Through the performance of *Naṅṅyārkūttu* and other funerary rituals, the deceased may depart for his new, liberated, and eternal existence. While telling the story of the frivolous, ludic Kṛṣṇa, the Naṅṅyār helps to “separate” and release the Nampūdiri's widow from her dead husband, and thus to help usher him into his new existence.

The sixth chapter is dedicated to a playful character, the Vidūṣaka, who introduces constant movement and a flow of talk