

# THE FLOWER NEEDS ITS ROOTS TO CONTINUE TO GROW

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In 1999, I attended a performance in a *kūttampalam* for the first time: “Bāli’s Death” (based on the first act of Bhāsa’s *Abhiṣekanāṭakam*), on the day dedicated to the beginning of knowledge (*vidyārambham*) in the Vadakkunathan temple of Trichur. Ten years later, I witnessed the same *kūṭiyāṭṭam* in this temple, where five acts are performed successively according to a five-year cycle. Nothing, or almost nothing, had changed. In the close atmosphere of the temple-theater, under the late monsoon rain, the same day, at the same hour (during the last *pūjā*, before the closing of the sanctuary’s doors), the artists were quietly getting ready – all Cākyārs, Nampyārs and Nañnyārs, being the only ones allowed to perform on this stage. Over five nights, the performance (including the entry and retrospection of Śrī Rāman, entry and retrospection of Sugrīva, and finally *kūṭiyāṭṭam*) led the few spectators through the maze-like narrative dramaturgy of which *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* holds the secret, through the magic of substitution acting (*pakarnāṭṭam*), where each actor assumes multiple roles, and ending with the final *rasa*, *karuṇa*, communicated by the master Ammannūr Kuṭṭan Cākyār embodying the monkey-king Bāli, who slowly agonizes at the end of the act. Both years, the spectators (numbering seven in 1999 and ten in 2009 on the last day, and far fewer the previous days) prostrated themselves at the end of the performance, which is always a ritual act – even if it is not only that.<sup>1</sup> According to the temple performers, the UNESCO declaration »had not changed anything« for the temples performances. Organized by the temple authorities in some of the larger temples of Kerala, temple performances are often poorly paid (between approximately 500 and 1500 rupees per day, for all participants combined) and take place before an extremely small, and sometimes non-existent, audience

– not including the deity. In Vadakkunathan, the only elements that had changed concerned the actors: whereas in 1999 my master Rāman Cākyār (who belongs to the Koypa-Paiṅkuḷam family) was invited to perform Sugrīva in 2009, his disciple Kuṭṭaṅcēri Saṅgīt Cākyār and Ammannūr Kuṭṭan Cākyār’s nephew, Ammannūr Rajanīṣ Cākyār, alternately played the role – the teachers had not waited for the UNESCO declaration to transmit their knowledge to the next generation of artists.

Temple *kūṭiyāṭṭam* is the root of an art that appears today as a wonderful two flowered-lotus. The first flower – the temple flower – is millennial. This *kūṭiyāṭṭam* is performed by the Cākyārs as »*kūttu*« year after year according to the temple calendar (*aṭiyantaram*), as a votive offering (*vaḷivāṭu*), or »to see« (*kālca*) on specific occasions.<sup>2</sup> Caressed by the three flames of the oil lamp of the *kūttampalam* stages, it has enabled the transmission (*via* the stage-manuals and onstage performances) of the brilliantly crafted narrative retrospections (*nirvaṇam*) and mono-acting dramas (*kūttu*) such as *Āṅgulīyāṅkam*, *Mantrāṅkam*, *Mattavilāsam* and *Prabandham*. The second, secular flower began to flourish in the 1980s under the leadership of not only the masters but also artists from castes other than the Cākyār, such as G. Venu. Very much alive today, this *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* has taken centre stage, covering the basic repertoire, »reviving« forgotten acts, training new students, building theaters, etc. The UNESCO funds have mainly benefited this secular *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*: aiding schools (whether well-established or newly formed), as well as dissemination in India (performances, conferences, publications, etc.) and indirectly, abroad – see Lowthorp’s contribution in this volume. Meanwhile the temple-flower remains, but appears in many respects to be a vestige threatened by a

changing society. I have described some of its treasures and discussed some of its difficulties elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> My goal here is to examine other current problems, based on information collected from the Cākyār families (Ammannūr, Kiṭaṅnūr, Kuṭṭaṅcēri, Māṇi, Painkuḷam and Potiyil) concerning the evolution of kinship in the Cākyār caste, the transmission of their knowledge and the exercise of their function in the temples.

### Evolution of kinship

Kinship data is fundamental, since only the Cākyārs, Nampyārs and Naṅṅyārs are allowed to perform on the temple stages even today.<sup>4</sup> Cākyārs and their female counterparts, the Illōṭammas, as well as the Nampyār-Naṅṅyār, are traditionally matrilineal and matrilocal. Until the 1930s, the Illōṭamma contracted unions (*saṃbadam*) with Nampūtiri Brahmins, to whom they bore sons who were trained in the theater by their maternal uncles (*ammāvan*) who lived on the same family property (*maṭham*). Since the abolition of the *saṃbandam*,<sup>5</sup> endogamous marriage has become the norm: the Cākyārs marry Illōṭamma women from other Cākyār families, who pass on their family names and status (Cākyār for sons and Illōṭamma for daughters), to their children. The Nampyār and the Naṅṅyār are also expected to marry each other and have Nampyār or Naṅṅyār children. If a Cākyār marries a Naṅṅyār as often happens nowadays, the children take on their mother's caste. Due to inter-marriage and lack of a systematic exchange strategy, Cākyār lines have gradually absorbed each other – the community that was once comprised of eighteen lineages<sup>6</sup> now has only six major families, some having been absorbed by Nampyār/Naṅṅyār families (such as the case of a branch of the Māṇi family in the twentieth century). Today, the Cākyār sub-caste, made up of approximately 200 members, is ageing due to a reduction in birthrate. The future lies with a dozen young Illōṭammas, from all families combined.<sup>7</sup> The Kiṭaṅnūr (Ceṇiya Pariṣa) lineage – a famous family of actors – has no more girls and will disappear.

To ensure the survival of families (and caste), the descent rules concerning female marriages have recently been modified. As of 1970-1980, many Illōṭammas have contracted hypogamous unions (once banned) and are able to transmit their status to their children. This reinforcing of matriliney has saved

families (for example, it is saving the Painkuḷam family, whose four young Illōṭammas were born of such unions). Meanwhile, on the side of male alliances, the Cākyārs traditionally marry women from a matrilineal system (Illōṭamma, Naṅṅyār, or, more recently, Nāyar, Potuvāl and Nampīśan) but whose castes (Nampīśan, Nāyar) are tending towards the patrilineal system, as they now also marry patrilineal Brahmin women. The emergence of patriliney, coupled with an enhanced matriliney in the Illōṭammas' case, creates a so-called ›confusion‹ about the caste of children and tensions regarding status, descent and succession. Moreover, questions arise as to the acceptance of children born of new marriages: if they are Cākyārs (or Nampyārs-Naṅṅyārs), will they have the possibility of performing in the temples? According to some masters, this could pose a problem in certain orthodox temples such as Guruvayur and Kottiyur. Finally, nowadays, women commonly move to their husband's home after marriage. Associated with exogamy and a generalization of the nuclear family, these virilocal movements contribute to a dispersion of the community increased by the men's mobility, which may also affect the transmission of the actor's profession.

### Transmission of the knowledge

According to a Cākyār proverb ›the Cākyārs are the enemies of Kūṭiyāṭṭam‹ (*kūṭiyāṭṭatinte śatru cākyār*), because they do not all become actors. Symbolically, the Cākyārs are bound to the theater thanks to a stage debut (*araiṅṅeṭṭam*) necessarily performed in the main family temple before the initiation (*upanayanam*) ceremony. But few of them (about one in five in the twentieth century) enter the acting profession. This phenomenon is not new but increased in the late nineteenth century with the end of Brahmin power and the abolition of the tenure system (*virutti*), and in the twentieth century with communist land reforms.<sup>8</sup> Formerly attached by land rights to several temples, the Cākyār families started to receive only meagre rewards in exchange for their performance duty. Despite the rise of secular Kūṭiyāṭṭam, many Cākyārs born in the 1950s preferred other jobs. However, with the prospects offered today by the acting profession stimulated by the recognition of UNESCO, the proportion of actors has been rising substantially in the lineages (about one boy in four now studies Kūṭiyāṭṭam).

Parents who were worried about their three sons embarking upon acting careers in 1999 no longer had such concerns in 2009. Nevertheless, the number of Cākyār-actors remains low (fewer than twenty, all generations included), and there is a substantial lack of gurus.

In 2008, the Kūṭiyāṭṭam community lost its three Ammannūr gurus: A. Mādhavan C., A. Paramēśvaran C. and A. Koccukuṭṭan C. The lineage still has five other actors, one of whom is the actor-master A. Kuṭṭan C., who notably teaches his nephews. In the Kiṭaṅṅūr family, there is K. Kuṭṭapan C., the only elder remaining, who retired in 2000 and who has not transmitted his vast knowledge (although he is willing to teach anyone who will come to him) and a young boy, son of a Kiṭaṅṅūr Cākyār, who is learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam (in the Paiṅkuḷam gurukuḷam). In the Paiṅkuḷam family, there are two actor-masters, Rāman C. and Nārāyaṇan C., but only one boy (out of six boys) learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam. In the Potiyil family, Mārgi Madhu and Mārgi Sajīv have many students, including their nephews (their cousin, Rañjit C., was trained by the Ammannūr gurus). Saṅgīt C. is the only actor in the Kuṭṭaṅcēri family. Finally, the Māṇi lineage has not had an actor-master since the death of guru Māṇi Mādhavan C., in 1980, whose son, P.K. Nārāyaṇan Nampyār, is the famous drummer guru.

Regarding the repertoire, Cākyārs consider that two of their works, *Mantrāṅkam* (based on act III of Bhāsa's *Pratijñāyauḡandharāyaṇam*) and *Aṅgulīyāṅkam* (based on act VI of Śaktibhadra's *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*)<sup>9</sup>, symbolically contain everything. The first requires all that an actor needs to know about verbal style (*vācika*) and Cākyār Kūttu, and the second about mimetic style (*āṅgika*), though no artist performs both of these *kūttus* in the temples. For example, in the Paiṅkuḷam family, Nārāyaṇan Cākyār performs *Aṅgulīyāṅkam*, and Rāman Cākyār *Mantrāṅkam*. Only Ammannūr Kuṭṭan Cākyār performs both the full *Prabandham* of Cākyār Kūttu and *Aṅgulīyāṅkam* in the temples, while only Rāman Cākyār performs the 41 days of *Mantrāṅkam* in the Perumanam temple (his most recent performance was in 2008), and just two young actors (A. Rajanīṣ C. and K. Saṅgīt C.) perform parts of *Aṅgulīyāṅkam*. However, »if these works are lost, Kūṭiyāṭṭam is lost«, some teachers confess. It is certain that if they disappear, many stories and unique acting

methods would be forgotten with them. This is what has happened to *Brahmacāri kūttu* (a votive *kūttu* based on the first Act of *Svapanaṅvāsavadattā* of Bhāsa, formerly performed in the Subrahmanyam temples). It is not because the repertoire is learned that it is performed – some Cākyār actors do not perform regularly in the temples, despite their extensive knowledge. And it is not because Cākyārs perform in the temples that the repertoire is played, as some performances are not provided in full.

### Performance of duties

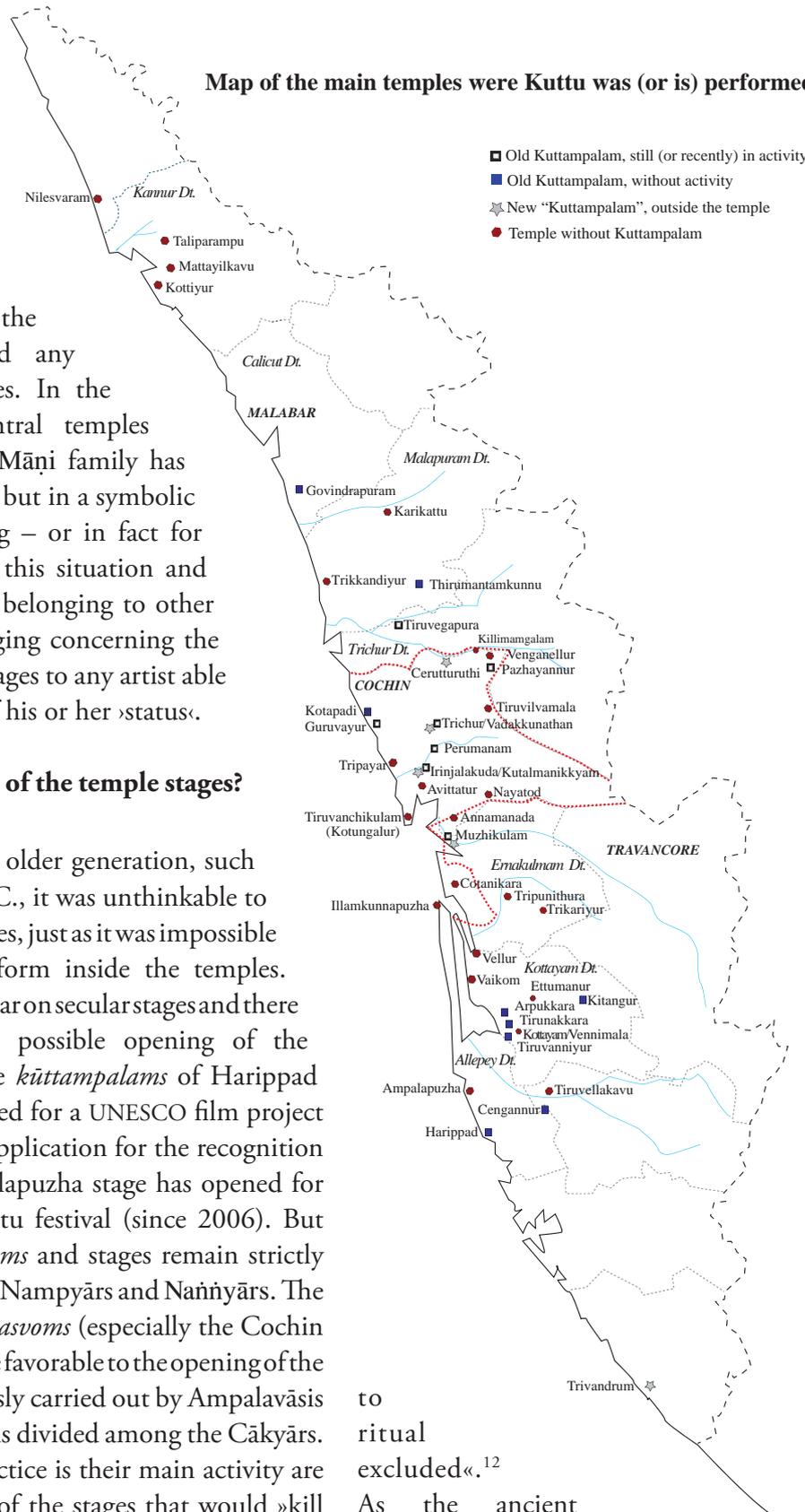
If it is only the Cākyārs, Nampyārs, and Naṅṅyārs who can perform in the temples, it is due to the power conferred by their particular status as a sub-caste of the Ampalavāsi and their hereditary family rights.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in the past each family was bound to several temples by a system of tenure in return for numerous performances (often lasting 41 days),<sup>11</sup> these temple performances are now rare. Only some Cākyārs such as Ammannūr Kuṭṭan Cākyār are now carrying out their hereditary duties. For them, performing in the family temple is a paid job and above all a social and family duty (see Ammannūr Rajanīṣ Cākyār's contribution to this volume). For other Cākyārs, performing in the temple is a burden due to the low remuneration and lack of audience. In addition, few temples still organize regular performances, both for financial reasons and due to a lack of public interest (see the calendar and the map annexed to this paper). Today, only three *kūttampalams* in central Kerala out of fourteen temple theaters in the state host long performances once or twice a year: Vadakkunathan (in Trichur) Kutalmanikyam (in Irinjalakuda) and the Shreekrishna temple in Guruvayur (for *Aṅgulīyāṅkam*). In two other *kūttampalams* (Perumanam and Pazhayannur), the performances are tending to disappear. In the old *kūttampalam* of Perumanam (where rights were transferred from the Māṇi to the Kuṭṭaṅcēri and then to the Kiṭaṅṅūr family), *Aṅgulīyāṅkam* stopped being performed in 1995. Rāman Cākyār (Paiṅkuḷam) resumed *Mantrāṅkam* at the request of the temple authorities for three years (for 12 days in 2006, 28 days in 2007 and 41 days in 2008), but without ever receiving any payment. Consequently, he stopped performing and *Mantrāṅkam* has since disappeared from the Kerala temple scenes. Retired masters such as late Ammannūr Koccukuṭṭan Cākyār and Kiṭaṅṅūr

Kuṭṭapan Cākyār have left several famous Kūṭiyāṭṭam stages empty (Muzhikulam, Kitangur, Vennimala, Annamanada, etc.). The numerous *kūttampalams* in the southern part of the state have not hosted any performances in decades. In the north and several central temples (such as Tripayar), the Māṇi family has taken on its family duty, but in a symbolic way, for lack of training – or in fact for lack of teachers. Given this situation and given the skill of artists belonging to other castes, a debate is emerging concerning the opening of the temple stages to any artist able to perform, regardless of his or her ›status‹.

### Towards an opening up of the temple stages? (conclusion)

For some masters of the older generation, such as late A. Parameśvaran C., it was unthinkable to perform outside of temples, just as it was impossible for other castes to perform inside the temples. Nowadays, all actors appear on secular stages and there is a debate about the possible opening of the *kūttampalam* stages. The *kūttampalams* of Harippad and Kitangur were opened for a UNESCO film project (which was part of the application for the recognition in 2001) and the Ampalapuzha stage has opened for an annual Naṅṅyār Kūttu festival (since 2006). But all the other *kūttampalams* and stages remain strictly reserved for the Cākyārs, Nampyārs and Naṅṅyārs. The current policy of the *devasvoms* (especially the Cochin Devasvom Board) is quite favorable to the opening of the temple activities previously carried out by Ampalavāsis only, but opinion remains divided among the Cākyārs. Those whose temple practice is their main activity are opposed to an opening of the stages that would »kill the profession«; others favor a partial opening of the temples where the rights have not been asserted for a long time (Harippad, Arpukkara, etc.) – *i.e.* »they can take these stages, but not ours«. Finally, others propose to open *kūṭiyāṭṭam* performances to all, »*kūttus* related

Map of the main temples where Kuttu was (or is) performed



to ritual excluded». <sup>12</sup>

As the ancient *kūttampalams* remain strictly reserved for specialist lineages, new »*kūttampalams*« are being built outside the temples (for the five past years in Muzhikulam, Irinjalakuda and now in Trichur),

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sometimes alongside the old temple theaters, which, at their side, seem like they are waiting for an impossible flashback to »those times when Brahmins attended the *kūttu* everyday«.

Some of the measures financed by UNESCO include the provision of pensions to retired gurus without whom Kūṭiyāṭṭam would not be what it is today. But many Cākyārs »did not see the color of the UNESCO money« (*dixit*) nor did they notice any change in their daily practice. They consider that Kūṭiyāṭṭam in temples is endangered by the lack of performance dates, remuneration, artists able and willing to play, and audience. If caste restrictions remain, the training of young Cākyārs, Nampyārs and Naṅṅyārs will be essential. The group will nevertheless still be in a fragile situation in terms of numbers. If the stages are open to all (as encouraged by the statutory evolution of the sub-castes themselves), then transmission of the ancient repertoire to all seems important. Finally, regarding the temple performance calendar, Rāman Cākyār suggests that the Sangeet Natak Akademi and its regional center in Trivandrum (Kutiyattakendra) intervene with the temple authorities for the *kūttu* to be programmed once again, with financial support. But what about the lack of audience? Is it only the gods who love Kūṭiyāṭṭam in the temples?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *References and notes:* See Mundoli Narayanan: »Over-Ritualization of Performance. Western Discourses on Kutiyattam«. *The Drama Review* 50-2 (T. 190, 2006): 136-153.

<sup>2</sup> See Ammannūr Mādhava Cākyār: »Kūṭiyāṭṭam kṣetraṅṅalil«. *Mārgi Sovanir* 5, 1976: 7-10 [= »Kūṭiyāṭṭam in temples«, *Sangeet Natak* 111-114 (1995): 33-37].

<sup>3</sup> See V. Johan: »Actresses on the temple stages? The Epic conception and performance of women's roles in Kūṭiyāṭṭam *Ramayana* plays«. In: H. Brückner, H. de Bruin, H. Moser (eds.): *Between Fame and Shame: Performing Women/Women Performers in India*. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz 2011, pp. 245-274.

<sup>4</sup> The Venganellur stage, an *Ūṭṭupura* or Brahmin dining hall, is open to all artists and constitutes the exception.

<sup>5</sup> For regulations on matriliney, from the beginning of the twentieth century until today, see K. Saradmoni: *Matriliney transformed. Family, law and ideology in twentieth century Travancore* (New-Delhi etc.: Sage publications and Altamira press, 1999) and R. Jeffrey: »Legacies of Matriliney: The Place of Women and the »Kerala Model«« (*Pacific Affairs* 77-4 / Winter 2004/2005: 647-664).

<sup>6</sup> See Paiṅkuḷam Rāma Cākyār: »Cākyār kuṭuṃbaṅṅal«. *Mārgi Sovanir* 5, 1976: x [= »The Chakyar Families«, *Sangeet Natak* 111-114 (1995): 127] and P. Venugopal: *Kutiyattam Register*. Thiruvananthapuram: Margi & UNESCO / Japan Funds-in-Trust, pp. 91-115.

<sup>7</sup> I refer here to the six genealogies of the Cākyār families I have traced back with the help of members of the respective families.

<sup>8</sup> On the old system, see P. M. Rajan Gurukkal: *The Kerala temple and The Early Agrarian System* (Kottayam: School of Social Sciences Mahatma Gandhi University, 1992). On the abolition of *virutti*, see P. Ramachandran: »Abolition of Uḷiyam and Virutti in Travancore«. *Journal of Kerala Studies* 3 / 3-4 (1976): 521-531. On land reforms, see e.g. P. Radhakrishnan: »Land Reforms in Theory and Practice: The Kerala Experience«. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16-52 (26 dec. 1981): A129-A137.

<sup>9</sup> See H. Moser: »Mantrāṅkam: The Third Act of Pratijñāyugandharāyaṅam in Kūṭiyāṭṭam«. *Bulletin d'Études Indiennes* 17-18 (1999-2000): 563-584. See also V. Johan (2011, op. cit.) on *Aṅguliyāṅkam*.

<sup>10</sup> On the status of the twelve Ampalavāsi sub-castes, see N. Subbaraya Iyer: »The Antarallas of Malabar«, *The Indian Antiquary* XXXVII (1908): 334-338.

<sup>11</sup> See Margi Madhu: *Āṭṭattil valiyatayāḷaṅṅal*. Tripunitura: International Center for Kutiyattam / Current Books, 2002 and P. Venugopal 2007 (op. cit.).

<sup>12</sup> For example, after the entries (*purappāṭu*) that open the performances of the stage debut and of the *kūttu* (*Aṅguliyāṅkam*, *Mantrāṅkam*, *Mattavilāsam*), the Cākyār goes »to see the god« (*tevere kanuka*) in the sanctuary. This moment is considered very important, particularly in Guruvayur where the offering, *prasādam*, is given »by the Tantri to Hanumān himself«. ❀