

FREEDOM IN PERFORMANCE: ACTRESSES AND CREATIVE AGENCY IN THE *KUTIYATTAM* THEATRE COMPLEX

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Abstract: Widely known among Indian theatre forms for its historical inclusion of female performers, the Kutiyattam theatre complex of Kerala encompasses three related performance forms – Kutiyattam, the enactment of Sanskrit drama with multiple actors and actresses; Chakyar Koothu, men’s solo verbal performance; and Nangiar Koothu, women’s solo acting performance. While women were nearly erased from the Kutiyattam stage through a variety of techniques over time, the postcolonial period has seen a dramatic revival of both Nangiar Koothu and women’s roles onstage in Kutiyattam, reflecting a wider democratisation of the art in terms of both performers’ bodies and performance spaces. This article considers the contemporary performance by professional Kutiyattam actresses of both Nangiar Koothu and Kutiyattam. While the two forms belong to a single overarching performance complex, they are remarkably different in terms of women’s performance. Drawing from nearly two years of ethnographic research among the Kutiyattam community in Kerala from 2008- 10, it highlights the perspectives of actresses themselves. In examining whether actresses prefer performing Kutiyattam or Nangiar Koothu and why, the article explores questions of gender and creative agency in women’s contemporary Kutiyattam performance.

Keywords: Kutiyattam, postcolonial period, female characters/roles, solo performance, intangible cultural heritage

Widely known among Indian theatre forms for its inclusion of women as performers since its origins in the eleventh or twelfth century, the *Kutiyattam* Sanskrit theatre complex of Kerala encompasses three related yet distinct performance forms – Kutiyattam, the enactment of Sanskrit drama with multiple actors and actresses; *Chakyar Koothu*, men’s solo verbal performance; and *Nangiar Koothu*, women’s solo acting performance. While

women were nearly erased from the Kutiyattam stage through a variety of techniques over time, the postcolonial period has seen a dramatic revival of both Nangiar Koothu and women's roles onstage in Kutiyattam, reflecting a wider democratisation of the art in terms of both performers' bodies and performance spaces. Against the background of these changes over time, this article considers the contemporary performance by professional Kutiyattam actresses of both Nangiar Koothu and Kutiyattam, two forms that, while belonging to a single overarching performance complex, are remarkably different in terms of women's performance. Drawing from nearly two years of ethnographic research among the Kutiyattam performance community in Kerala from 2008-10, it highlights the perspectives of actresses themselves. In examining whether actresses prefer performing Kutiyattam or Nangiar Koothu and *why*, it explores questions of gender and creative agency in contemporary Kutiyattam performance.

Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu in historical Perspective

Literally meaning 'combined performance' (*kuti + attam*), Kutiyattam is a theatre of the imagination, one where actors and actresses have the power to spend hours improvising upon a single line of text, to embody heroes, heroines, demons and goddesses, and to move backwards and forwards through time, millennia even, in a single sitting. Composed by classical Sanskrit playwrights such as Bhasa, Saktibhadra and Harsha, Kutiyattam presents plays dating from approximately the second to tenth centuries C.E. which generally narrate the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics, although a few address Buddhist themes.¹ Conveying its narrative through mudra hand gestures, highly emotive facial expressions, stylised movements, and rich percussive accompaniment, Kutiyattam is distinguished by the fact that the art never performs a play in its entirety, but rather a single act of a play over multiple days of performance, generally between five and twelve days. These extended performances consist of three parts, beginning with the *purappad*, or the solo entry of a character, followed by several days of each character's solo *nirvahanam* flashback sequence that constitute the bulk of performance, and ending with one to three days of *kutiyattam* proper combined performance with multiple actors/actresses onstage (see Diagram 1).² Most plays require the entry and flashback sequences of several characters before the dramatic kutiyattam proper conclusion can take place, although in temple practice this is sometimes reduced. In order to avoid confusion, from this point forward I will use the terms Kutiyattam complex, Kutiyattam (the performance form), and kutiyattam proper (combined performance) to denote the three levels of performance outlined in Diagram 1 below. As Kutiyattam performs individual acts as self-contained performances, the purpose of the nirvahanam flashback sequence is to bring the audience

up to speed with the particular act being performed by recounting everything that has happened up until the point where the act at hand begins. While this unabridged model is still performed on hereditary temple stages, Kutiyattam performance on contemporary public stages is usually restricted to an abridged single night of combined kutiyattam proper performance.

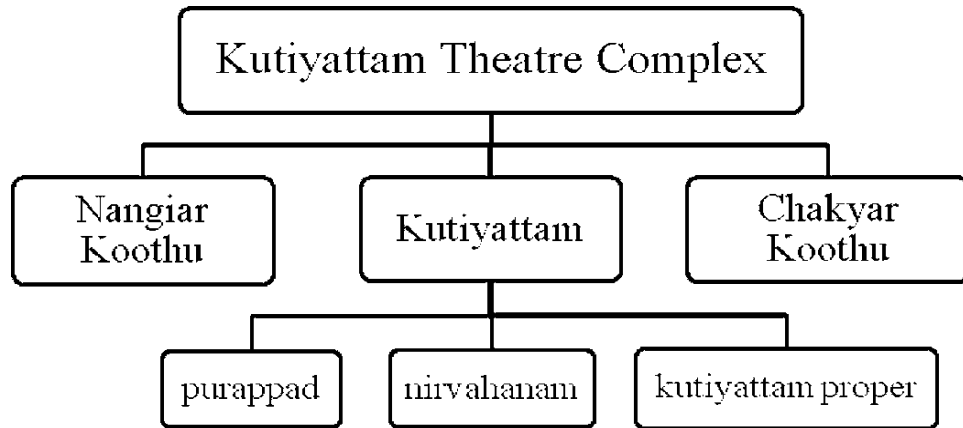


Diagram 1: The Kutiyattam theatre complex as emically categorized

While it is not unusual to hear proclamations that Kutiyattam is two thousand years old, scholars generally date the theatre's origins to Kulasekhara varman, a ninth/tenth or eleventh/twelfth century C.E. Kerala king who is attributed both by oral tradition and historical records with the reshaping of Sanskrit dramatic performance that marked the birth of Kutiyattam (Moser, 2011; Raja, 1980 [1958]).³ The composer of two plays still part of the Kutiyattam repertoire, *Subhadradhananjayam* (The Wedding of Arjuna and Subhadra) and *Tapatisamvaranam* (The Sun God's Daughter and King Samvarana), Kulasekhara is credited with introducing several innovations that deviated from wider Sanskrit dramatic production, namely: 1) The reduction of performance to only one act at a time and the associated introduction of the nirvahanam flashback; 2) Movement away from *lokadharmi*, or realistic acting, towards *natyadharmi*, or stylised acting, through theatrical elaboration that included a four-fold interpretation of each Sanskrit verse (its oral recitation; grammatical rendering through mudra hand gestures; exploration of the verse's inner meaning through mudras; and the interpretation of all possible implied meanings through mudras) as well as the introduction of the *pakarnattam* technique, whereby the solo actor or actress switches back and forth seamlessly between various roles; 3) The addition of humorous material to performance by adding material outside of the dramatic text such as the parody of the four *Purusarthat*s (The Aims of Human Life); 4) Introducing

local language used by the *vidushaka*, jester-figure and companion to the hero, to explain the Sanskrit and Prakrit passages to the audience; and 5) The confining of Sanskrit stage production within the temple and the Nambiar/Nangiar and Chakyar hereditary performance communities (Gopalakrishnan, 2011; Raja, 1964).⁴ Through meticulous historical research, Heike Moser (2011) has convincingly argued that Chakyars and Nangiars most likely started performing together in Kerala beginning in the eleventh or twelfth centuries. Prior to this, records indicate that both were performing an art of some kind, Nangiars in Kerala and Chakyars in Tamil Nadu respectively, although how or if these performances were related to Kutiyattam is not clear. While the meaning of Kutiyattam as ‘combined performance’ is usually taken to indicate the presence of multiple actors and actresses on the dramatic stage, Moser provocatively suggests that it originally connoted the ‘performing together’ of two previously independent groups of performers, the Nangiars and the Chakyars.

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, Kutiyattam remained an exclusively hereditary occupation performed by upper-caste Chakyar actors, Nambiar drummers, and Nangiar actresses, in exchange for land, food, and clothing. During this time it was performed solely in upper-caste temples of Kerala in three different contexts – as yearly performance cycles (*adiyantaram*) often corresponding with a temple’s annual festival, as privately sponsored theatrical events (*kazhchekoothu*), and as either temple or privately sponsored rituals (*wazhiwaddu*), the last generally for the benefit of childless couples desiring children. In the midst of extreme social, political, and economic upheavals in early twentieth century Kerala, hereditary Kutiyattam families found themselves both bereft of financial means to support themselves and socially stigmatised if they continued to practice a ‘backward-looking’ hereditary occupation inside the temple. As with many others of the time, members of Kutiyattam families began leaving their hereditary occupations in droves. For those who remained, pressure mounted to adapt the art form to keep up with the times, particularly to bring it outside of the confines of the temple. Painkulam Rama Chakyar became the first to take such a risk by performing outside of the temple for the first time in 1949, just after the birth of the new postcolonial nation.⁵ Thereby paving the way for the widespread democratisation of the art’s performance space, he would later play a major role in the Kutiyattam department of Kerala Kalamandalam by democratising performer’s bodies as well, training the art’s first non-hereditary actors and actresses.⁶ As I have elaborated elsewhere, contemporary Kutiyattam is thus characterised by two separate, yet overlapping spheres of performance – the temple sphere of hereditary performance and the public sphere of democratised performance (Lowthorp, 2013a; 2013b).

Nangiar Koothu, by contrast, is the female solo performance form within the Kutiyattam complex. Essentially the purappad and nirvahanam of the heroine's maid servant Kalpalathika in the second act of Kulasekhara varman's *Subhadradhananjayam*, contemporary Nangiar Koothu was at some point extracted and expanded upon as a separate solo performance with its own mandated performance time within various temples.⁷ In this extended flashback sequence, the actress narrates the entire story of Lord Krishna (*Sri Krishnacharitam*) up until the point where Krishna's good friend Arjuna (Dhananjaya) marries Krishna's sister Subhadra. Performed as various single episodes, Nangiar Koothu is composed of upwards of two hundred verses that if performed in their entirety would require up to forty-one days of performance. Nangiar Koothu has historically played a crucial role in the making of every actress – with Nangiars, Nambiars, and Chakyars unable to assume their caste name until the completion of their stage debut (*arangettam*) just before puberty, young girls have been initiated as both actresses and members of their caste through the performance of the purappad and certain verses of Nangiar Koothu for centuries.⁸ As Nangiar Koothu is an extension of one of King Kulasekhara varman's plays, it is no surprise that Kutiyattam oral tradition ties the origin of the form to him. As the legend is told, the king fell in love and married a brilliant Nangiar actress and, motivated by his love, created a solo performance form – Nangiar Koothu – for her to perform.⁹ Moser (2011) has noted, however, that this flashback sequence of *Sri Krishnacharitam* was probably introduced sometime in the sixteenth or seventeenth century as part of the Krishna bhakthi devotional movement in Kerala. Until the 1980s, the art was performed strictly on hereditary temple stages in Kerala, initially lasting twelve days but eventually cut down to seven or three (Daugherty, 1996).¹⁰ As an art of the hereditary Kutiyattam community, Nangiar Koothu was similarly affected by Kerala's intense twentieth century upheavals, and as we will see in a later section, the art has played a seminal role in the process of revitalising women's performance on the Kutiyattam stage.

Gender differentials in Performance

This section briefly considers the possibilities for women's performance within the Kutiyattam complex by examining differences between performance opportunities for actors and actresses in both Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu. It thus takes a look at gender differentiated opportunities for performance rather than performance- in-practice at any given time. Later sections will elaborate how these opportunities have been translated into practice both in historical and contemporary contexts.

As mentioned above, Kutiyattam consists of three parts – the purappad entry of a character, the same character's nirvahanam flashback, and the kutiyattam proper, with multiple characters reciting their own Sanskrit or Prakrit lines onstage.¹¹ The kutiyattam proper is the only portion in which multiple characters appear alongside each other onstage, although as Daugherty (2011) has observed, even here the focus remains upon the individual performer, with other characters often exiting the stage and only re-entering right before their next line. While in kutiyattam proper actors and actresses stay in character (or their character's thoughts) the majority of the time, in the solo nirvahanam the actor or actress is generally given more freedom as a narrator with the power to embody varying genders, deities, demons, and animals, moving through time and space at his or her discretion.¹² This fluidity of form is accomplished through the acting technique of pakarnattam, literally 'performance of transformation' in which an actor transforms into different characters of the narrative during his or her storytelling.¹³ The technique forms an important part of the imaginative elaboration that characterises the art form as a whole. The most obvious signal of pakarnattam transformation is undertaken when actors transform into female characters by tucking the end of their skirt into their belt while placing both hands on their right hip, which they then exaggeratedly cock to one side.¹⁴ There is no similar signal when actresses transform into male characters while enacting pakarnattam (Madhavan, 2010; Sullivan, 2010). While the technique is often employed within kutiyattam proper generally as a way for characters to give imaginative form to their thoughts, pakarnattam peaks in nirvahanam performance where the actor or actress has free imaginative reign as solo storyteller.

In terms of gender differentiation, however, both kutiyattam proper and nirvahanam performance are predominantly male domains. Without taking into consideration whether available female roles are actually staged, the number of male characters in Kutiyattam plays far outweighs the number of female characters, meaning that the opportunities actors have to perform in kutiyattam proper as well as nirvahanam flashback sequences vastly outnumber similar opportunities for actresses. While the actor's sole purpose on the Kutiyattam stage is to act, actresses are assigned a number of other tasks as well. When not acting onstage themselves they still appear, but are restricted to a seated position playing the cymbals and/or reciting verses for actors during their nirvahanam sequences. Additionally, while actors have a wide range of types of characters that they enact as well as different costumes and make-up styles for many of these characters, as Johan (2011) has remarked, all female characters share the same costume and make-up style, and the majority of them share the same emotional state (*bhava*), enacted as 'modest, shy, discreet (*lajja nanam*)'.¹⁵ Thus, while Kutiyattam allows ample space for actors to creatively

inhabit multiple roles onstage, it generally leaves actresses decreased opportunities for performance, both in number and variety of roles.



Image 1: Kalamandalam Sindhu enacting *lajja nanam* as Sita alongside Margi Raman as Rama in *Surpanakhankam*

(The Act of the Demoness Surpanakha), Jan. 24, 2009 (Photo by Author).

Nangiar Koothu, by comparison, offers a stark contrast. A strictly women's domain, it represents the extended nirvahanam sequence of the heroine's maid servant in Act II of *Subhadradhananjayam* as described above. Whereas a standard nirvahanam generally comprises between nine and fifty-five verses and is performed in one to five days, Nangiar Koothu is significantly longer, with 217 verses and performed in up to forty-one days.¹⁶ In terms of women's performance, Nangiar Koothu thus allows actresses a freedom similar to Kutiyattam's nirvahanam, with creative license to adopt the pakarnattam technique in their role as storytellers fluidly embodying a variety of characters – men and women, gods and goddesses, humans and non-humans. I argue that it actually grants the actresses more freedom, for whereas nirvahanam focuses on the backstory of a single character with the actor or actress retaining that character's persona throughout their performance, Nangiar Koothu is much more than the backstory of Subhadra's maid servant Kalpalathika. The actress in Nangiar Koothu assumes the persona of Kalpalathika only at the very beginning and very end of the entire performance sequence, but does not retain it throughout, instead narrating the full story of Krishna as an omniscient narrator.¹⁷

The Erasure of Actresses from the Kutiyattam Stage

While several of the dramas enacted in Kutiyattam have female characters and even mandate that some of them should perform both a purappad and nirvahanam, these roles were erased from the Kutiyattam stage over time.¹⁸ K. G. Paulose (2006) suggests that this process happened for a number of reasons, namely: 1) When Kutiyattam entered the temple it became a ritual form which required Kutiyattam troupes to travel from temple to temple, thus likely cutting actresses to decrease troupe numbers; 2) Actresses were required to spend a lot of time maintaining the family and, unlike actors, were forbidden to enter the temple for performance on certain occasions (for ex. their menses); and 3) The technique of pakarnattam, in which actors have the power to enact female roles, gave them a convenient means of erasing actresses from the stage. As the *Natyasastra*, the Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts dating from 200 B.C.E to 200 C.E., mandated the participation of women in theatre, Madhavan (2010) sees this elimination as part of a larger historical trend of erasing women from the stage throughout the Indian subcontinent (see also Yarrow, 2001).

There is definitive evidence that by the fifteenth century some women's roles had already been erased from the stage. An anonymous fifteenth century critique of Kutiyattam's deviations from the *Natyasastra*, the *Natankusa* (A Restraining Book for Actors) rails against the art's use of the technique of pakarnattam as well as its 'distortion' of the dramatic text through its added nirvahanam flashbacks.¹⁹ One of the details it specifically takes issue with is an actor in the costume of the monkey god Hanuman enacting the roles of a number of other characters, including Sita.²⁰ While Rajagopalan (1997) observes that it appears the author of the *Natankusa* had viewed only a limited number of plays, we know from this account that some women's roles in some temples had already been erased from the stage by this time.

Looking at the Kutiyattam temple stage today, Johan (2011) observes that the participation of women is often limited to a 'voice only' role sitting onstage as a 'singing Nangiar,' and details how this erasure of women onstage occurs in a number of ways. First, the roles of female characters accompanied by their husbands are replaced by actors through both the pakarnattam technique and that of *kettatuka* (hearing and acting).²¹ In the latter, the actor stops and pretends to listen to the female character recite her lines, and then proceeds to enact the female character himself through pakarnattam, thereby becoming the character and communicating her lines through mudra hand gestures without them being recited loud.

A second strategy for erasing actresses from the stage is by having a ‘singing Nangiar’ simply recite the character’s lines from the side of the stage. The stage manual (*kramadeepika*) of *Ascharyachudamani* (The Wondrous Crest-Jewel) puts it plainly, ‘Usually in *Abhisekanataka* (The Coronation Play) the female roles are not acted; the lines of the female characters are recited by the Nannyar who recites. The Nannyar who recites must recite all the lines of the female characters. This is the custom’ (Jones, ed, 1984, 98). And thirdly, female characters may be replaced onstage by a physical object such as a lighted lamp or piece of cloth, with their lines either recited by a ‘singing Nangiar’ or enacted through *kettatuka*. The *purappad* and *nirvahanam* of female characters mandated in certain Kutiyattam production manuals are simply not performed on the temple stage. One strategy for avoiding the performance of a female character’s *nirvahanam* is to add her verses to the *nirvahanam* of male characters in the same act – in this way, the full backstory of the act and its characters is enacted without an actress having to set foot onstage.²² While this erasure is generally viewed as lamentable, Johan argues that at least theatrically speaking, the exclusion of actresses on the temple stage served to enrich Kutiyattam performance by inspiring ‘dramatically powerful substitutes’ such as those listed above (2011, 268).

Despite this erasure of actresses onstage over time, however, legends of talented Nangiar actresses and their acting feats still abound

– the feat of the ‘floating Nangiar’ in *Tapatisamvaranam*, actresses outperforming Kathakali actors, manifesting acting illusions for the audience onstage, training Chakyars and Kathakali actors, falling to the floor violently in the suicidal hanging scene of *Nagananandam* (How the Nagas were Pleased), and circumambulating the temple atop an elephant as the goddess Kartyayani in *Subhadradhananjayam* (see Paniker, 2005 [1992]; Rajagopalan, 1997). The bulk of these legends most likely stem from the last few centuries, and the last two accounts, the hanging scene and the goddess atop the elephant, have both been enacted on the temple stage within living memory. It is therefore difficult to know the exact degree to which women’s roles were erased from the stage when and where, as each Chakyar family in Kerala had its own temple obligations where they would have independently decided which roles to stage depending upon the circumstances. We do know that for at least several decades, the only Kutiyattam that has been performed upon the hereditary stage has been by the Ammannur Chakyar family, who in their five Kutiyattam performances still stage the roles of Lalitha and Subhadra, but cut the roles of Sita, Tara, and vijaya, as well as Lalitha’s *nirvahanam*.²³ However, Rajagopalan notes that even here the women’s roles staged are made ‘as short as possible’ (1997, 16). Thus, as

Moser has noted of the recent history of women's hereditary performance, '[f]emale roles were minor, short, and, at least for the last two or three centuries, without lengthy elaborations; often they were sitting on a stool and gesturing with the hands only [...] (with) the principal part of the Nangiar on stage consist(ing) in reciting verses during the long *nirvahanam* flashbacks of the male characters' (2011, 179).

As for the state of Nangiar Koothu, not much is known from the historical record. We do know that it has been performed in the temple consistently as the right and obligation of various Nangiar families in Kerala through the present-day, although in ever-decreasing number and capacity. Moser (2008) reproduces a list of temples in the southern Kerala kingdom of Travancore in which Nangiar Koothu was being actively performed in 1934 for anywhere between eight and twelve days (see also Gilchrist Hatch, 1934). Whereas in 1934 there were fifteen temples actively presenting Nangiar Koothu in southern Kerala, by 2008 only four yearly performances remained in the entire state, none of them among the earlier fifteen. This decrease encompassed not only the number of performances but the number of days of each performance as well, with some decreasing from twelve days down to three (Daugherty, forthcoming). Before the revival of Nangiar Koothu began in the mid-1980s, as Daugherty (forthcoming) reports, it was in such a reduced state that D. Appukuttan Nair, one of those instrumental in later reviving the art, considered it 'irretrievable'.

Revival of Nangiar Koothu and Women's roles in Kutiyattam

The postcolonial period has seen a dramatic revival of both women's roles in Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu as part of a wider democratisation of performance space and performers' bodies in the art. Painkulam Rama Chakyar was instrumental in democratising both, taking the art outside the temple for the first time in 1949 and teaching the first non-hereditary professional artists at Kerala Kalamandalam, the state performing arts institution.²⁴ The 1965 opening of a Kutiyattam department at Kalamandalam under his direction ushered in a period of aestheticisation and intense creativity in the art, part of a search for a greater audience base that would guarantee the art's survival. This process entailed the standardisation of a strong, aestheticised body, the development of class syllabi, recreation of the female costume, revitalisation of female roles onstage, revision of the mizhavu percussion technique, and the editing of repertoire for 'modern' audiences with lower attention spans. This process of aestheticisation and editing was intended to adapt the art form to the changing times and wider, non-expert audiences outside of the

temple, and was central to the constitution of the public face of contemporary Kutiyattam (see Moser, 2008; 2011; Lowthorp, 2013a).

An integral part of this process of aestheticisation and innovation was centered around women in Kutiyattam, particularly the beautification of the female costume and the reinsertion of all female characters onstage, including the revival of the female purappad and nirvahanam. Painkulam Rama Chakyar reinserted and extended the parts of characters such as Sita, Lalitha, vijaya, and Ajjuka and her companion, taught the Lalitha purappad and nirvahanam (Act II) to his female students, and choreographed new sequences such as *Udyana Varnana* (Describing a Garden), in which two female characters perform onstage together in an aesthetically pleasing description of a beautiful garden. Due to his conscious redesigning of the Kutiyattam stage, Casassas (2012) has referred to Painkulam Rama Chakyar as the art's 'first stage director'. Before his death in 1980, he had already started to engage Nangiar Koothu, sending Kalamandalam Girija to study for a time with a hereditary actress and teaching verse number eighty of *Srikrishnacharitham* to his female students (see Daugherty, forthcoming).

The wider revival of Nangiar Koothu began with the 1984 publishing of mizhavu guru P. K. Narayanan Nambiar's *Sri Krishnacharitham Nangiarammakoothu* (Stories of Lord Krishna for Nangiar Koothu).²⁵ Gathering verses from several different palm leaf manuscripts, he assembled them into a single 217-verse performance manual to expressly facilitate the revival of Nangiar Koothu. This publication marked the first time the material had ever been publicly accessible. In 1986, Kalamandalam Girija became the first actress to perform Nangiar Koothu on a public stage (SNA, 1986-87). Around the same time, a parallel process began of Usha Nangiar learning and performing the entire *Sri Krishnacharitham* story under the direction of Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, and Margi Sathi, later together with Margi Usha, learning and performing the entire story under the direction of D. Appukuttan Nair.²⁶ Today, Nangiar Koothu is an indispensable part of women's performance in the Kutiyattam complex -- as a female solo performance it is easy to both organise and sponsor, and has been readily incorporated into dance festivals nationwide. As a result, Nangiar Koothu is now performed more often than Kutiyattam.

Beginning in the 1990s, in addition to reinstating and re-choreographing the entire sequence of Nangiar Koothu, actresses were involved in several productions that saw the revival of multiple Kutiyattam dramas for the public stage. The institution Margi in Trivandrum, in collaboration with Ammannur Madhava Chakyar of Irinjalakuda, was responsible for most of these revivals during this period, which included the revival of both

female characters and their purappad and nirvahanams onstage (see Daugherty, 2011).²⁷ Since the turn of the new millennium, innovation within Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu has increased exponentially, in particular innovation undertaken by actresses themselves.²⁸ This trend began in 1999 with the publication of Margi Sathi's production manual for the story of Rama, *Ramacharitham*, which pushed the boundaries of Nangiar Koothu by going outside its exclusive performance of the story of Krishna for the first time.²⁹ Since then, several solo compositions have been written and performed by actresses focusing on the life of women both within and outside of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics, for example by Kalamandalam Girija (Kunti, Madhavi); Kalamandalam Shylaja (Parvathi); Kalamandalam Sindhu (Bhadrakali); Usha Nangiar (Subhadra, Mandodari, Menaka, Draupadi, Sakuntala); Margi Sathi (Kannaki, Sita); and Margi Usha (Kali in *Darikavadhom*), among others.³⁰ Several actresses have additionally revived and newly choreographed new Kutiyattam performances, as well as engaged in other new forms of creativity.³¹

Image 2: Margi Sathi performing the episode *Ahalya Moksham* (Ahalya's Liberation) from her Nangiar Koothu production manual *Sri Ramacharitham*, accompanied by Kalamandalam Sajith on mizhavu, Aug. 18, 2009 (Photo by Author).



Contemporary Women's Performance and Perspectives

Possibilities for women's performance in the Kutiyattam complex are thus vastly different now from only thirty years ago. In terms of women on the contemporary stage, with nearly all female Kutiyattam roles now staged, Nangiar Koothu performed by all actresses, and new choreographies abounding, the art is perhaps closest to its full potential for women than at any previous point in its history. It is important to reiterate that this represents the situation for Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu performed on the public stage -- on the temple stage women's participation is still extremely limited. Some limitations do, however, still remain on the public stage. While in the last section we saw several female characters' purappad and nirvahanam segments revived, these are still rarely staged. Furthermore, the bulk of public Kutiyattam performances feature the combined kutiyattam proper performance where male roles still generally dominate, both in number and the opportunities afforded them for improvisation. As mentioned above, Nangiar Koothu is generally more popular today with audiences and sponsors, offering actresses greater opportunities to both display and hone their skills, as well as to make a living. Margi Sathi observed the difference between the two forms from an audience's perspective: "When there are a lot of characters onstage like in *Balivadham* -- Bali, Sugriva, Lakshmana, Rama, and Tara -- the audience doesn't know who they all are. But in Nangiar Koothu there is only one artist onstage, and if the audience concentrates on her facial expressions they'll definitely be able to understand the story" (Margi Sathi, 2009b).

This last section is devoted to bringing the voices of contemporary, professional Kutiyattam actresses to the table.³² As we have seen in previous sections, the possibilities for actresses in Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu performance both in the present-day and historically are remarkably different from each other and that of actors. In presenting actresses' answers to the question, "Do you prefer performing Kutiyattam or Nangiar Koothu and why?" it explores the notion of creative agency in women's contemporary Kutiyattam performance from their own perspective.

The theme of valuing 'freedom' in performance emerged as overwhelmingly dominant among the actresses interviewed, with the majority preferring Nangiar Koothu over Kutiyattam. As Aparna Nangiar replied, "Of course I prefer Nangiar Koothu, because it's a solo performance which offers us full freedom onstage. In Kutiyattam, women's roles aren't given that much importance, and to a certain degree they're not performed. Compared to men's roles, there aren't many women's roles that are performed. That's why

I prefer Nangiar Koothu” (Nangiar, 2010). As the only actress interviewed with hereditary temple stage experience, we can see her perspective from both public stages -- “women’s roles aren’t given that much importance”-- and temple stages -- “and to a certain degree they’re not performed” -- emerge in her answer. The rest of the actresses interviewed, as with the majority of professional Kutiyattam actresses today, do not have hereditary temple stage experience.³³ And yet several others echoed this perspective. In Margi Usha’s words, “I prefer performing Nangiar Koothu to Kutiyattam because in Kutiyattam we perform only limited roles. For example, in *Subhadradhananjayam* we are only able to play the role of Subhadra and nothing else. Because Nangiar Koothu is a solo performance, we can therefore decide how we would like to perform the emotional states of the characters (*bhavas*) and how to act out the scenes. [...] It has an immense scope for performance” (Margi Usha, 2010a). Margi Sathi also reflected, “There are very few female roles in Kutiyattam, so I think Nangiar Koothu was created to give actresses more acting opportunities” (Margi Sathi, 2009b). She made a similar reflection when she told the story of first learning Nangiar Koothu, describing, “Appukuttan Sir asked if I had studied Nangiar Koothu, and I said I hadn’t, that I didn’t know it. He told me that it’s like Kutiyattam’s *nirvahanam*, and he asked me to try it. I thought it was interesting, because in the dramas females have very small parts, but there is only one actress or actor on stage in *nirvahanam*. It therefore presents a challenge to portray all of the characters at once, constantly switching between them. That prospect interested me a lot” (Margi Sathi, 2009a). In this context, among other things, freedom means the freedom to come to the stage in the first place, as well as to be given importance and authority in performance.

In the majority of other responses, ‘freedom’ in performance already assumed actresses’ presence onstage, denoting instead the freedom of creative agency, of having an unfettered imagination and of becoming anything they wanted onstage. As Kalamandalam Shylaja asserted, “Nangiar Koothu is my favorite. Solo programs give us the greatest chance to demonstrate our full acting abilities. Kutiyattam doesn’t allow us to do that. In Kutiyattam when you play the female role, you simply recite that character’s lines and act her part, and then it’s over. you’re *only* able to act that particular role. In Nangiar Koothu you can become men, demons, gods, women, men -- you can perform anything you want. We can become anything we want in Nangiar Koothu” (Kalamandalam Shylaja, 2009). Kalamandalam Krishnendu similarly reflected, “When I consider the question from an artist’s viewpoint, I prefer Nangiar Koothu. I like to perform Kutiyattam, but Nangiar Koothu allows actors more freedom. [...] Kutiyattam gives us less freedom, we always have to stay in character.³⁴ you also have to pay attention to the convenience of the other actors, and when there are several characters onstage it is challenging [...] When you take

that into account, our freedom onstage decreases. Nangiar Koothu isn't like that, nirvahanam isn't like that. It's according to our own agency, our own wishes -- we have the whole stage to ourselves. That's why I'm more interested in Nangiar Koothu. Even though I have less interest in Kutiyattam, I still like it, it's just that I usually perform very small roles" (Kalamandalam Krishnendu, 2009).

Margi Usha characterised this creative freedom using the wider term *manodharmam* (improvisation), and further elaborated upon what this means for artists in terms of technique, "In Kutiyattam, there are certain restrictions -- timing restrictions and others that you cannot ignore. However during solo performance we can decide to do as much *manodharmam* as we like. [...] It is only when we are given a wide performance scope that we are able to really succeed onstage. [...] Nangiar Koothu uses *pakarnattam*. Even though it does not have the character Arjuna, we can still become Arjuna onstage. Nangiar Koothu therefore has the greatest potential for acting. It gives us the freedom to act to our highest ability. [...] In Kutiyattam, women's roles, especially those we perform the most -- Subhadra, Tara, and vijaya -- don't have *pakarnattam*" (Margi Usha, 2010b). She further described how this individual creative freedom leads to diversity in performance, with each actress free to interpret each story and how she wants to present it onstage, "Each actress performs Nangiar Koothu according to her own point of view." She proceeded to discuss the example of Puthanamoksham (the demoness Puthana's liberation).³⁵ The performance generally sees the demoness transform into a beautiful woman before setting forth to kill the children of Ambady in search of the baby Krishna. The way that Margi Usha performs the scene, and how I have seen a few others perform it as well, is by gently breastfeeding several babies to death with poisoned nipples. As Margi Usha explained, "Puthana is a demoness, but inside she still has a sense of motherhood. Even though she kills children, she still always has a sense of gentleness that is deep inside of the demoness in whatever she does. We have this conception of woman. So when we kill children onstage we don't do so violently, we don't break their bones or hit them with sticks. [...] Sathi *chechi* (Margi Sathi) has chosen not to transform into a beautiful woman before she enters Ambady. She enters the town in the form of a demoness, and has imagined that a demoness would kill children violently" (ibid).³⁶ This creative agency similarly gives actresses the freedom to constantly reinterpret their own performances, as she stressed, "If you repeated something today that you said yesterday, you would say it differently, wouldn't you?" (ibid).

Actresses further related this freedom of creative agency and improvisation to other areas of performance. Margi Sathi spoke of creative freedom in a different sense, namely that of choreography, as she played a seminal role in the choreographing of *Sri Krishnacharitham*:

“The basic text of what I perform comes from Nambiar *ashan*’s (guru) book, but Nangiar Koothu allows more freedom, so after reading other texts and selecting other parts to perform onstage I tried it. Nangiar Koothu has that kind of freedom” (Margi Sathi, 2009a). Similarly echoing Kalamandalam Krishnendu’s point that actresses in Nangiar Koothu “have the whole stage” to themselves, Kalamandalam Shylaja humorously related this to artistic recognition, laughing, “When you perform Nangiar Koothu, you perform in your own name. After a successful Kutiyattam performance, everyone’s contribution is acknowledged. Not in Nangiar Koothu! In Nangiar Koothu, if I perform well, I get all of the credit!” (Kalamandalam Shylaja, 2009). Thus we see the freedom of creative agency related to the freedom of recognition -- Nangiar Koothu gives actresses not only the opportunity to showcase their abilities in both acting and choreography, but to be recognised for them as well.

Image 3: Margi Usha performing *Narasimhavataram* (The Man-Lion Avatar) from the



episode *Dasavataram* (The Ten Avatars of vishnu) in Margi Sathi’s *Sri Ramacharitam*, Nov. 17, 2009 (Photo by Author)

Despite framing their responses in terms of freedom in performance, some actresses were hesitant to give Nangiar Koothu a clear win over Kutiyattam. As Margi Sathi reflected, “I like both of them, but there is more freedom in Nangiar Koothu. In Kutiyattam there are several characters onstage and you play only one of them, so from start to finish you must stay in the mind of only that character. It is a drama with several characters onstage

together, so it's a different experience. In Nangiar Koothu you have more freedom, we don't have to depend upon anyone else. We have the freedom to become anything. I like both and have the same feelings about both; they're just different" (Margi Sathi, 2009b). Similarly, Kalamandalam Sindhu replied, "I like to perform Nangiar Koothu a little more, because it gives us the ability to perform several characters within a story. Kutiyattam mandates that we can only perform a single character at a time, although it still gives us plenty of acting opportunities. In Nangiar Koothu, however, it is different, we are able to embody all characters onstage. That's why I enjoy performing Nangiar Koothu a little more than Kutiyattam" (Kalamandalam Sindhu, 2010).

Kalamandalam Girija was the only actress interviewed that highlighted a feature of Kutiyattam that she preferred to Nangiar Koothu, namely the ability to recite one's own lines. Sitting with me in a performance space at Kalamandalam, she answered, "I like both. In Kutiyattam, however, we're able to have more of a sound effect, whereas in Nangiar Koothu there is only acting. For example, in Kutiyattam you can express sadness or anger in your voice while reciting your lines [...] you act while you recite, whereas in Nangiar Koothu you only show mudras while someone else recites for you. When you recite yourself while acting, it has a greater effect. That's my opinion. [...] They're different, but I like them both" (Kalamandalam Girija, 2009). She proceeded to demonstrate her point, breaking into a verse of sadness, her voice, high-pitched and trembling, dripping with emotion. In the next moment, she switched to reciting Lalita's lines after being rejected by both Rama and Lakshmana, her voice starting out at a low pitch and crescendoing into a high pitch of anger. She had indeed touched upon the single point where Kutiyattam offers actresses more expressive ability than does Nangiar Koothu.³⁷

Within the various discussions of Kutiyattam, the only actress to bring up the subject of nirvahanam was Kalamandalam Krishnendu. With the terms of the discussion being Nangiar Koothu and Kutiyattam, actresses interpreted the latter to mean kutiyattam proper, as most hadn't had the opportunity to perform a female character's nirvahanam onstage.³⁸ Kalamandalam Krishnendu, however, discussed her performance of a male character's nirvahanam. As part of the Kutiyattam M. A. program initiated at Kerala Kalamandalam in 2008, Kalamandalam Rama Chakyar assigned his students the performance of opposite gender roles several times.³⁹ For one of these assignments, Kalamandalam Krishnendu performed Ravana's nirvahanam in *Asokavanikankam* (The Act of the Garden Asoka; Act v of *Ascharyachudamani*) over two and a half hours. She described the experience, "I have mostly performed women's roles in Kutiyattam, but I have gotten the most satisfaction from playing Ravana in *Asokavanikankam* (The Act of the Garden Asoka); last year. [...]"

Everyone came to watch the performance. [...] When I take that into account, I get a lot of satisfaction performing Kutiyattam, and one of the reasons I found it so satisfying was because it was nirvahanam, which allows the actor more freedom” (Kalamandalam Krishnendu, 2009).

‘Freedom in performance’ thus emerges as that which professional actresses of the contemporary Kutiyattam complex most value -- the freedom to be onstage, the freedom of recognition, and most importantly, the freedom to improvise and innovate, to become anything they want as omniscient storytellers regaling the audience with their tales. For most of the actresses interviewed here, Nangiar Koothu gives them the freedom they so value. They generally find Kutiyattam more restrictive, giving actresses less opportunity onstage. Women have performed on the Kutiyattam stage for nearly a thousand years. Their presence has ebbed and flowed, responding to the changing times, and yet they still endure. We have seen how they were nearly erased from the dramatic stage, their creative agency in performance curtailed, yet they were and are still celebrated in legend as powerful agents with legendary dramatic skills. And we have seen how they were gradually welcomed back to the stage, consciously reinserted into performance as part of a drive to help the art change with the changing times by attracting new audiences. Kutiyattam thus became part of a larger trend within postcolonial Indian theatre and dance to support and celebrate the presence of women onstage. Painkulam Rama Chakyar’s initial vision to reinsert actresses on the Kutiyattam stage and to revive Nangiar Koothu has perhaps succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Nowadays, female students of Kutiyattam far outnumber male students, Nangiar Koothu has surpassed Kutiyattam in both popularity and frequency of performance, and much of the contemporary innovation in the Kutiyattam complex is undertaken by actresses. The art has gone back to its roots and yet moved far beyond, offering freedom in performance to all actresses who now seek it.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Margi Sathi (1965-2015), one of the most prominent Kutiyattam Actresses of her generation, and instrumental in making the art form accessible to wider audiences.

NOTES

1 While the famed playwright Bhasa has been dated by scholars between 200B.C.E – 200 C.E., the claim that Bhasa is the author of the Trivandrum plays part of the Kutiyattam corpus is still debated (Brückner, 1999/2000).

2 While this is the general sequence, there are exceptions such as that described in the production manual of Act I of *Ascharyachudamani* which calls for the following order of performance: 1) Lakshmana's purappad + nirvahanam; 2) Lalitha's purappad + nirvahanam; 3) kutiyattam of Lakshmana and Lalitha; 4) Rama's purappad + nirvahanam; 5) kutiyattam of Lakshmana and Rama (Jones, ed 1984).

3 UNESCO is one of the culprits that often proclaims an exaggerated age for the art. For an examination of the effects that the art's 2001 recognition as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage have had upon the art, see Lowthorp 2015a; 2015b. According to Moser 2008, as Kulasekhara is a dynastic family name, there are numerous kings in the historical record named Kulasekhara varman, making it impossible to pinpoint exactly which one authored *Subhadradhananjayam* and *Tapatisamvaranam*.

4 Paulose (2003) argues that the third and fourth innovations listed above occurred after Kulasekhara, and suggests that the innovations did not herald the creation of Kutiyattam as we know it, but only prepared the stage for the theatre to emerge two centuries later (Paulose, 2006). Furthermore, the last innovation is not agreed upon by all scholars, some of whom date the art's entry into the temple during the thirteenth or fourteenth century (see Narayanan, 2006). And finally, upon investigation into historical sources, Moser (2008) found that all of the innovations attributed to Kulasekhara are based solely upon oral tradition.

5 See Madhavan 2015b for a brief summary of Painkulam Rama Chakyar's contributions to Kutiyattam.

6 It was actually Mani Madhava Chakyar who taught the first non-hereditary students, although none of them became professional actors. These included his two sons in the 1950s, one of whom is the illustrious mizhavu guru

P. K. Narayanan Nambiar, and Christopher Byrski in the 1960s, the first international student in Kutiyattam. According to a narrative related to me by Diane Daugherty (2015), the Ammannur family was so upset that Mani Madhava Chakyar taught his sons to act that they stopped inviting him to their Kutiyattam performances in Thrissur's vadakkunathan temple.

7 As Paniker 2005 [1992] has noted, in some temples Nangiar Koothu was presented without the purappad.

8 According to Daugherty (1996), whereas all Nangiars were earlier expected to perform their arangettam in the art, few Nangiar girls have debu performances nowadays.

9 According to Rajagopalan, several Kerala kings throughout history have had Nangiar wives, as they were ‘noted for their beauty and histrionic talents’ (1997, 8).

10 According to Moser (2008), the first public performance of Nangiar Koothu was at Kerala Kalamandalam in 1984 by Kalamandalam Girija. For further details on the hereditary performance of Nangiar Koothu, see Daugherty 1996, Moser 2008, and Paniker 2005 [1992].

11 Casassas 2012 has aptly observed that whereas in kutiyattam proper actors and actresses recite their own lines as the verses generally represent a character’s direct speech, in both nirvahanam and Nangiar Koothu they are recited by a fellow actress-cum-musician seated stage right. It is important to note that only noble male characters recite in Sanskrit, whereas female and lesser male characters recite their lines in Prakrit, a colloquial form of Sanskrit.

12 This non-linearity is characteristic of wider Indian storytelling (Arya, 2010).

13 Madhavan 2010 writes that the term means ‘performance by transferring from one to another’ in which the actor undergoes a ‘chain of transformations’. The root of the first part of the term, *pakarooka*, is defined in the Malayalam- English dictionary as meaning ‘to change position, transfer, pour from one vessel to another’ – an apt description of the technique (Warrier, Bhattathiri and Warrier, 2001).

14 See Madhavan 2010 for an extended discussion of pakarnattam.

15 Two exceptions to the standard costume and make-up for women’s roles are the goddesses Kartyayani in *Subhadradhananjayam* and Gauri in *Naganandam*, who have special costumes and distinctive make-up, notably employing what is generally the hero’s make-up, with a green face and rice-paste *chutti* frame (see Rajagopalan, 1997).

16 The length of nirvahanam performance varies widely depending upon which act of a play it belongs to, as later acts incorporate the nirvahanam verses of all preceding acts

into their performance. See Rajagopalan 1997 for a translation of the performance manuals for several female nirvahanams.

17 I would argue that the role of the actress as an omniscient narrator in Nangiar Koothu is more akin to the actor's role in *Anguliyankam* (The Act of the Ring).

18 For example, known nirvahanams exist for the characters of Lalitha in *Ascharyachudamani*, Subhadra in *Subhadradhananjayam*, and Mandodari in *Ascharyachudamani* (this list is not exhaustive).

19 See Madhavan 2015a for a provocative argument that pakarnattam is indeed included in the *Natyasastra*.

20 This is referring to the performance of *Anguliyankam*.

21 It is worth noting that kettatuka as a technique is not only used to cut female characters; it is also used to cut minor male characters. For an extended explanation of the contemporary erasure of female and other minor characters on the Kutiyattam temple stage, see Johan 2015.

22 Diane Daugherty related these details to me in a telephone conversation in 2015, giving the example of how some two dozen slokas of the character Lalitha's nirvahanam in Act II of *Ascharyachudamani* were incorporated into the nirvahanam of the character Rama, thus avoiding its performance onstage. Specifically, the nine slokas from Lalitha's Act I nirvahanam plus additional slokas reframing the action of Act I as nirvahanam in Act II were moved from Lalitha's Act II nirvahanam to Rama's Act II nirvahanam.

23 Namely Act I of *Subhadradhananjayam*, Acts I and III of *Abhishekanatakam* (The Coronation), and Act II of *Ascharyachudamani*.

24 Kalamandalam Girija became the first non-hereditary woman to be trained as a Kutiyattam actress in 1971.

25 Nirmala Paniker (2005) [1992] describes a parallel process of revival at Ammannur gurukulam in Irinjalakuda. In the early 1980s she and her husband G. Venu conducted research on Nangiar Koothu, and in 1984 guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar began

composing an *attaparakaram* (acting manual) from two extant manuscripts which he began teaching to his students in Irinjalakuda in 1986.

26 See Moser 2008; 2011; Casassas 2012; and Paniker 2005 [1992] for more details about the revival of Nangiar Koothu.

27 The revival of all seven acts of *Ascharyachudamani* was undertaken by Margi with the funding of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, whereas the revival of Act II of *Subhadradhananjayam* and Subhadra's Act v *nirvahanam* were sponsored by Dr. Diane Daugherty with the funding of the American Institute of Indian Studies (Daugherty 2011).

28 It is worth noting that several others have been active in this regard as well -- the Ammannur gurukulam, with G. Venu choreographing several new pieces for both the Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu stages (see DuComb, 2007; Venu, 2002), and more recently Ammannur Rajaneesh Chakyar; Guru P. K. Narayanan Nambiar at the Mani gurukulam in Lakkidi; and Margi Madhu Chakyar. See Casassas 2012 for details concerning the innovative strategies of Kalalamandalam Girija, Margi Sathi and Usha Nangiar.

29 This sparked a debate as to whether the performance of non-Krishna stories could be considered Nangiar Koothu. Kalamandalam Sindhu is currently undertaking a project to perform *Ramacharitham* in its entirety for the first time.

30 Solo compositions without a strict focus upon women have also been choreographed.

31 For example, Kalamandalam Girija has choreographed several acts of *Venisamharam*, and Usha Nangiar has participated in the revival of the *Naganandam* hanging scene as well as Act v of *Subhadradhananjayam* in which the goddess Kartyayani appears, although without the elephant. Aparna Nangiar has more recently (2009) performed the hanging scene. Margi Usha has gone further to experiment with creating a new art form, Nangiarattam, which uses the basic performance style of Nangiar Koothu while adding text sung in Malayalam behind the performance.

32 Please see Casassas 2012 for an article on Nangiar Koothu that has done an exceptional job of foregrounding the personal visions of actresses.

33 Margi Sathi is an exception to this, as she was once invited to perform Nangiar Koothu as an adiyantaram on a hereditary stage in the Kottayam Kaviyur temple.

34 It is interesting to note that ‘we’ in this context refers to actresses, as male actors do in fact have the freedom in kutiyattam proper to perform pakarnattam.

35 For a vivid description of the performance of Puthana Moksham in Nangiar Koothu, see Daugherty forthcoming.

36 According to Arya Madhavan, a student of Margi Sathi since the mid-1990s, Margi Sathi used to perform the scene the way most actresses do today, but changed her interpretation based on research into the episode in the *Bhagavatha*.

37 It is worth noting that several new Nangiar Koothu choreographies by G. Venu, such as *Narasimhavataram* (The Man-Lion Avatar), include the innovation of the actress reciting her own lines onstage.

38 As far as I know, among the actresses I interviewed in 2008-10, only Margi Sathi and Margi Usha had performed Lalitha’s nirvahanam onstage, although both Kalamandalam Girija and Shylaja had been taught the piece by Painkulam Rama Chakyar (Daugherty, 2015). This number has since increased, and Aparna Nangiar recently performed Mandodari’s nirvahanam both at the Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam’s twenty- eighth Kutiyattam festival (January 1-12, 2015) and at the same institution’s 2014 Gurusmarana Kutiyattam festival (July 1-12, 2014), whose focus was on the research and performance of female characters in Kutiyattam.

39 The first class of students included Kalamandalam Krishnendu, Kalamandalam Athira, and Kalamandalam Sangeeth Chakyar.

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