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## *Tēvāram*: Worshipping Gods on Stage

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### Abstract

Building on the idea of “ritual quotation,” this article offers a new perspective on rituals enacted within contemporary theatrical performances in South India. Drawing from an existing corpus and reproduced in a different framework, the ritual *tēvāram* is embedded in a broad web of intertextual relationships comprised not only of items of repertoire and prescriptive manuals, but also of elements of ritual practices, shared beliefs, claims of social status, and ongoing negotiations between individual imagination and collective expectations.

Usually a Nampūiri domestic ritual, *tēvāram* is also carried out within Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances. Through a detailed analysis, I argue that the enactment of *tēvāram* on stage is not merely the stylized reproduction of a religious service, but it is rather an integral part of the narrative and aesthetic body of the theater practice. The performative and textual milieu of *tēvāram* creates scope for variations that modify both the plot and the *tēvāram* ritual itself. Kūṭiyāṭṭam-*tēvāram* thus becomes a transformative action and a tool of negotiation in the positioning of individuals within the social matrix.

### Keywords

*tēvāram* – domestic ritual – ritual practice – theater – Kerala – social matrix

Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Kerala’s living Sanskrit theater, is often described by scholars as ritual theater.<sup>1</sup> Such a definition can be accounted for by many factors. Originating partially as a religious practice, Kūṭiyāṭṭam appears to have emerged

1 See, for instance, Gopalakrishnan 2006; Richmond, Swann, and Zarrilli 1990.

in its current form around the fifteenth/sixteenth century CE.<sup>2</sup> Until the 1950s it was performed only within sacred areas, in ad hoc edifices (*kūttampalam*) close to a Hindu temple. It served as public forum for upper castes of the region, in particular, the Nampūtiris, the most influential Brahmins of Kerala, who acted as the patrons of Kūṭiyāṭṭam until at least the beginning of the twentieth century and have continued to maintain close ties with the Kūṭiyāṭṭam community.<sup>3</sup> The theoretical and embodied knowledge connected to this performative art was a prerogative of specific castes: besides the Cākṃyār (actors), there were also the Nampyār (drummers) and the Naṅṅyār (actresses). For the Cākṃyār actors, the theater performance represented their religious duty (*kuladharmā*), their service to the temple. While today it is also performed in secular settings,<sup>4</sup> this theatrical tradition still possesses strong links with the Hindu temple context and offers an extraordinary historical register of associations between religious expressions and theatrical practices both through its repertoire and its textual reflections.

Beside its historical location inside the temple area, its social interpretation in the Hindu context, Kūṭiyāṭṭam is referred to by its practitioners as “a sacrifice for the eyes” (*cākṣuṣayajña*). I argue that to say that Kūṭiyāṭṭam is “a sacrifice for the eyes” constitutes more than a simple explanation, but rather an important pointer toward the ritual nature of the theatrical tradition. It offers indeed a starting point to think of Kūṭiyāṭṭam through ritual as an internal category that exposes the specific, local nature of this theater form in relation to the cosmopolitan textualized tradition of Sanskrit theater, which was until premodern times one among the many forms in which religious life expressed itself.<sup>5</sup>

The present article thus analyzes the local ritual practice called *tēvāram* as it is enacted on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theater stage, and its relation to the *tēvāram* of

2 See Devadevan 2019.

3 As to the historical system of patronage that supported Kūṭiyāṭṭam practice and the role of Nampūtiri families, see Moser 2008; Mucciarelli and Oberlin 2019; Devadevan 2019.

4 Kūṭiyāṭṭam has undergone important changes in the last eighty years or so, especially since it has been designated as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Lowthorp 2015). There are now abridged Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances of two hours. Some of the stories from the repertoire have been adapted for public events such as book release functions and school festivals. This study examines the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance as it is enacted in temples and in a few small private institutions still active today, as well as how it is transmitted in Kūṭiyāṭṭam manuals.

5 Indian Sanskrit theater represents a full-fledged system of thought that from its foundational myth to its practices combined religious aspects and secular elements in a way that defies the idea of a dichotomy between religious and secular, sacred and profane; see Bansat-Boudon 2020.

Nampūtiris Brahmins, a domestic ritual that is considered by the actors themselves as a fundamental point of reference.

Through the combination of textual analysis with the ethnographic fieldwork carried out over the last ten years,<sup>6</sup> this article aims at exploring the mechanism of textualization and recreation of the ritual practices as they articulate the locality of the performative tradition. Using a triple structure of ritual, theater, and daily life that lie at the core of tēvāram as interpretative tool, I will highlight the modalities in which ritual practices are recreated and transduced on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage.

## 1 Tēvāram: Ritual Quotations on Stage

A highly complex performative art, Kūṭiyāṭṭam is comprised of various historical and social aggregates. Bringing together diverse theatrical traditions,<sup>7</sup> pan-Indian and local, it employs a disparate set of languages. Most of what is uttered is in Sanskrit, except for a specific form of performance (Cākyāruttu) where the main language is Malayalam. Additionally, some parts of the theater repertoire use text codified by the tradition as Tamil idiom and, most importantly, an entire level of recitation is conveyed through the use of a refined gestural language.<sup>8</sup> The linearity of the Sanskrit drama as well as the linearity of time are continuously interrupted through specific mechanisms of expansion, digression, and flashback. Moreover, costumes, makeup, and music constitute different registers of communication. The drumming that accompanies the performance gives full significance to the often otherwise mute movements of

6 Since 2012 I have been going to Kerala at least once a year for periods of three weeks to three months to undertake field work in collaboration with various Kūṭiyāṭṭam artists in the areas of Palakkad, Trissur, and Trivandrum. The time spent together with the Nepathya Centre for Excellence in Moolikkūlam, Aluva, has been fundamental.

7 Kūṭiyāṭṭam shares some features of classical Sanskrit theater practice and theory as represented in the foundational *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Rajagopalan 2000), from the second century CE. Moreover, references to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in Kerala theatrical works from the fourteenth century hint at the presence of pan-Indian reflection on art and aesthetics in Kerala already at an early period. Yet, Kūṭiyāṭṭam detaches itself from the Nāṭyaśāstric system and turns instead to a wide array of local performative practices (cf. *teyyam* elements). For a thorough analysis of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, see Shulman 2021; Johan 2014; Cākyār 1973.

8 We still find an example of the Tamil idiom in a portion recited by the drummer during the final night of the performance called *Anguliyārikam* (“The act of the ring”). This portion is referred to in the acting manuals as “Tamiḷ Nampiar.” This linguistic category with reference to the theater practice is used also in *Lilātilakam*, the earliest remnant treatise on Kerala literary uses from the fifteenth/sixteenth century (see Kuñṅanpiḷḷa 1969: 281, commentary to first *sūtra*).

the actors, thereby creating a dialog between sound and silence. Most importantly, a defining feature of Kūṭiyāṭṭam lies in its different modes of staging. Narrative segments intersects with mimetic, expressionist parts, and with ritual segments, to which *tēvāram* belongs.

A polysemic term, *tēvāram* possesses rich resonances in the South Indian cultural space, connecting both with a poetic mode and a ritual practice.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the Tamil poetic tradition referred to as *tēvāram* has been extensively studied,<sup>10</sup> no analysis of the concept in the Kerala context has been carried out to the best of my knowledge.<sup>11</sup> In the region where Kūṭiyāṭṭam theater is performed, this term covers a variable set of ritual actions that partially overlap with Kerala devotional worship, or *pūjā*.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, the Malayalam lexicon points to a polythetic cluster of characteristics that shift across time, space, and groups.<sup>13</sup> Based on a negation (*vaccallāte*), *tēvāram* is described by way of contrast and absence: “worshipping a deity in places other than a temple.”<sup>14</sup> This

9 In Tamil, *tēvāram* denotes a Śaiva canon – a corpus of devotional poems to the god Śiva – as well as a garland for the god. According to Shulman 1990, *tēvāram* texts were performed in temples; perhaps there was even a kind of *tēvāram kriyas*, a fixed sequence of ritual actions.

10 See, among others, the analysis of Tamil *tēvāram* by Peterson 1989.

11 The proximity of the Kerala and Tamil cultural areas warrant a more in-depth study of the possible genealogical, historical connection. For now, a better understanding of Kerala *tēvāram* is needed in order to go beyond noting a common shared connection to devotional practices.

12 For ritual as a “culturally constructed system of symbolic communication” characterized by limitations of time and space, elements of repetition and alternation, intentionality, and formality, see Tambiah 1981: 119. For further analysis of the diagnostic features of ritual, see Michaels 2016. For a definition of ritual in relation to ritual behavior, see Platvoet 1995.

The term *pūjā* is often described as a *nityakriya*, a set of daily worship, which constitutes one of the essential features of Nampūtīri’s life. Nampūtīris’ practice will be addressed below. In the context of the Nambiśśan caste, *tēvāram* is a prerogative of women. There are also attestations of non-Brahmanic *tēvāram* in songs (*tōṛram*) from the ritual theater of possession called Teyyam. In various *tōṛrams*, stock passages mentioning *tēvāri* are part of the Kollattiri kings’ political communications. I thank Abhilash Malayil for pointing this out to me.

13 The idea of polythetic network (having features that are shared by members of a class but that are not essential for the members of that class) was already used by Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1997). It refers to Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblance.

14 See Pillai 1988: 582: “*Dēvārādhana, īsvarapūjā (dīpaṃ, dhūpaṃ, puṣpaṃ, nivēdyam, mutalā-yavakoṅṭ) kṣētraññāliḷ vaccallāteyulla pūjā. avanavan tanne ceyyunnat*”) Worshipping a deity in places other than a temple. Each person for himself.” It is worth noticing that in some instances, *tēvāram* is practiced by Nampūtīris in temples. This apparent discrepancy can be traced back to the fact that some temples belong to Nampūtīris families. The final sentence refers to the fact that there is no priest involved in the practice of *tēvāram*.

explanation focuses on the place where the ritual is *not* performed, hinting at the possibility that *tēvāram* as a ritual set is best understood in the context of an ongoing dialog between temple and household.<sup>15</sup> In addition to these two types of localities, *tēvāram* is positioned in a third setting: the theater stage.

Forming an integral component of the theatrical tradition, the ritual segments must be understood in relation to their performative context. I propose to think of the ritual segments in terms of “ritual quotations”: items drawn from an existing corpus and reproduced more or less precisely in a new framework.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, they are embedded in a broader web of intertextual relationships comprised not only of items of repertoire and prescriptive manuals, but also of elements of ritual practices, shared beliefs, claims of social status, and ongoing negotiations between individual imagination and collective expectations. As the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges shows us in his novel *Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote*, once a text is quoted, even when reproduced verbatim, it is no longer the same as the source text, as both the audience and the practices that produced the text have changed.<sup>17</sup> In the same way, a ritual “quoted” within a theatrical performance undergoes a radical transformation, becoming something other than a ritual action performed as part of an actual domestic religious practice.

From several perspectives, *tēvāram* constitutes a particularly apt case study to think through the dynamic of quotation. First, the ritual practice seems to undergo a fundamental transformation when incorporated into a stage performance as a ritual quotation. When enacted in a *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performed by *Cākyār* actors, *tēvāram* bears important differences from the religious domestic

15 Schildt 2012: 107–109 provides an important account of *tēvāram* in relation to Kerala architecture and domestic practices.

16 This hermeneutical frame was suggested to me by Cezary Galewicz. The parallel between language and ritual has already been employed in Staal 1979. I am not suggesting a systematic and structural equivalence, but rather a similarity in patterns of interaction, shifting, and internal modification. The idea of “ritual quotation” represents a further development of this similarity. The analysis of intertextuality from the point of view of performances has been carried on also in the field of linguistic anthropology (see Bauman and Briggs 1990), especially for the concepts of entextualization and decontextualization. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (1996) have argued for the importance of looking at the processes that create texts as processes of entextualization and con-textualization. I consider the concept of quotation as a specification of the broader category of entextualization as a “process of rendering a given instance of discourse a text, detachable from its local context” (Urban 1996: 21). I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out to me this important line of research.

17 The novel, first published in the literary magazine *Sur* in 1939, appeared in 1942 as part of the collection *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* and again in the later collection *Ficciones* (Borges 1974).

practice to which it refers. This metamorphosis points to a new type of action that, while joining in both theatrical and ritual orders, belongs to neither.<sup>18</sup>

Second, the worship of the gods on stage presents a peculiarity of some consequence: the actors are permitted to perform a ritual bearing the same name in their everyday life only after they have enacted it on stage. When segments taken from ritual and religious procedure are included in the performances, the religious and ritual practices constitute an item of intertextual reference for the “reproduction” of the ritual segments on stage. In the case of *tēvāram*, the opposite process seems to occur, with the offstage world mirroring the theater. *Tēvāram* thus connects back to the social sphere, while at the same time evoking the imaginary space of performance. In this sense, it provides a perfect key study that combines not only theater and ritual, but also a third mode of reality – ordinary life offstage.

These three orders of reality – the ritual, the theatrical, the social – lie at the core of *tēvāram*. In order to gently tease them apart, I will look at the internal dynamic of ritual, engaging in three levels of examination that mirror the three orders of reality: (1) a morphological-ritual analysis investigating the ritual procedure; (2) a dramaturgical-theatrical discussion of the way in which the ritual is incorporated into the theatrical performance; and (3) an investigation into how this performative practice forms part of a social contest whereby the acting community appropriates a ritual act that belongs to another caste.

## 2 The Ritual Level: The Procedure of *Tēvāram*

The first level of analysis relates to the procedure (*caṭān̄ṅ*) of *tēvāram* – its basic components and mechanism on stage. It also examines the morphology and syntax of its sequences in the specific temporal segment of the performance.

In the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* theater tradition, *tēvāram* can only occur in a very specific setting: the entry of the stage director (*sūtradhāra purappāṭ*). *Purappāṭ* is a Malayalam term that, in the context of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, corresponds to *pātrapraveśa*, the Sanskrit technical term indicating the first entry of a character on stage.<sup>19</sup> The *sūtradhāra*, or stage director, has the task of introducing the story to the audience, either by giving a first account of it or by narrating the context in

18 A detailed description of the ritual can be found in the Appendix and is discussed at length in the next paragraph.

19 On *purappāṭ*, see Rajagopalan 2000; Shulman 2012: 13–17; Johan 2017; Śliwczynska 2007a.

which the plot of the act will take place.<sup>20</sup> Each Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance stages a single act of a drama, be it the first, final, or any other. But only when the first act of a play is performed does the *sūtradhāra* enter the stage in the *sūtradhāra purappāṭ*. In the libretto of Sanskrit plays, the stage manager appears only in the prelude of the drama. However, there are exceptions. We see also a *sūtradhāra purappāṭ* when a character functionally similar to the stage director enters the scene at the beginning of an act other than the first.

In both types of *sūtradhāra purappāṭ*, the actor paints the background of the story to come and builds the “doorframe” of the performance. The *tēvāram* constitutes the ritual threshold that the audience has to cross in order to enter the characters’ universe. Thus, the placement of it within the *sūtradhāra purappāṭ* has great significance. Such positioning entails a moment of transition, a feature the *tēvāram* shares with the first entry of a character on stage.

The first appearance of a character on stage (*purappāṭ*), which constitutes the frame for *tēvāram*, serves both to introduce the character to the audience and as a ritual moment.<sup>21</sup> Alongside the flashbacks presenting the character, it includes fixed-step sequences, codified movements (*kriyās*), and the recitation of propitiatory verses. As such, this entire procedure configures the beginning of the performance by creating an alternative reality where things that are otherwise impossible in everyday life can happen.<sup>22</sup> At this delicate moment, the actor is still a storyteller,<sup>23</sup> but he is also ushering us into the story by transforming himself into a character.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the social rules prescribing the conduct of the actors are temporally suspended within *purappāṭ*. For instance, the actor is allowed to access the inner space of the temple and ring the bell that hangs at the threshold. The temporary or permanent subversion of the social rules together with a state of being in-between and the sense of belonging to a community (*communitas*)

20 The term *sūtradhāra* is explained in two ways: as a puppeteer who holds the threads or as an architect who holds the plumb line. The meaning of the word possibly lies at the intersection of these two ideas, which shares an architectural conception of the text. My thanks to Naresh Keerthi for pointing it out to me.

21 See also the Nāṭyaśāstra’s description of *pūrvaraṅga*, the prelude of a drama, in Bansat-Boudon 1992.

22 See *Natankuśa*’s critique of the *kriyā* performed during *purappāṭ* (Paulose 1993).

23 Just as in many other theater traditions, in Kūṭiyāṭṭam one of the functions of the actor on stage might be that of the storyteller, an amphibious figure who lives both in and outside the plot of the drama (I take this explicatory formulation from Peters 2015).

24 Two clear moments, marked by the same gesture, occur when the actor enters his role as storyteller – just before the flashback narrative and when he becomes the character at the end of *purappāṭ*. For the ritual component of *purappāṭ*, see Mucciarelli and Oberlin 2019. For the various functions taken over by the actor, see Johan 2014.



have been defined as diagnostic features of a liminal phase by Turner.<sup>25</sup> As part of this section, the *tēvāram* thus partakes of the liminal character of the ritual entrance. The subversion of social structure, the possibility of shaping reality by way of suspension, seem to be at the heart of *tēvāram*.

The following section briefly describes the procedure of *tēvāram* according to Mārgi Madhu Cākyār, director of the Nepathya Centre for Excellence.<sup>26</sup> A detailed table of the ritual segments is provided later in the Appendix.

### 2.1 *Narrative Embedding: “At That Time I Saw”*

On the first night of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, the actor – who alternates in taking the role of the storyteller and of one of the characters – enacts a ritual sequence that forms part of the *purappāṭ*, then immediately moves on to the *tēvāram*. Just before the beginning of the ritualized adoration of the deity (*pūjā*) that forms the core of *tēvāram*, the actor employs gestural language to express the sentences “At that time I saw all the objects necessary for the worship of the gods. What are they all? Perfumed water, flowers, sandal paste, an oil lamp, food for offering, a plank, etc.”<sup>27</sup> Immediately after that, the actor will repeat the same sequence, no longer as part of the narration, however, but as part of the ritual preparation for which the invisible objects are displaced.

### 2.2 *Pūjā*

Following the initial narrative framing, the actor begins to perform the *tēvāram* silently. The core of the ritual consists of various offerings comprising recurring ritual segments.<sup>28</sup> The actor first prepares and purifies the spot and all the ritual agents, then introduces the invisible ritual props named in the narrative sequence and invokes the divine river Gaṅgā. By entering the invisible

25 The liminal phase, as conceived first in van Gennep 1909 and elaborated in Turner 1969, represents the core of most ritual practices. According to Turner, it allows the ritual actors to undergo a temporary or permanent substantial transformation.

26 I learned the procedure of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam tēvāram* from Mārgi Madhu Cākyār in September 2018. The indications and prescriptions are transmitted orally, using written support. The written version I used as script is a copy of the notebook belonging to Nepathya Sreehari Cākyār, Mārgi Madhu’s son and an actor himself in the Nepathya Centre for Excellence.

27 *ā samayattiṅkal kaṇṭu dēvakāryattinuḷḷa vastukkaḷ. At̃ entellām? Jalagandha pūṣpa dhūpa-dīpa nivēdyāsanādikaḷ.*

28 The grammatical nature of the combinatory character of ritual is thoroughly addressed by Michaels 2016. With regard to the *pūjā* procedure in the Kerala context, see Bhaṭṭatirippāṭu 2014: 185–209. In the broader context of Hindu devotion, Flueckiger 2015 has recently recontextualized *pūjā* in terms of materiality and everyday practices. As for the ideology of transaction that subtends *pūjā* distinguishing it from other religious rituals, such as *yañja*, *seva*, and *bali*, see Mayer 1981 and Bühnemann 1988.

conch, the goddess sanctifies the water contained in it.<sup>29</sup> The whole offering and ritual space is then consecrated, and the person offering the sacrifice is purified through the worship of the self (*ātmārādhana*).

This final step is of great importance as it raises the question of the diverse modes that interact on the stage. The self (*ātman*) becomes fit to perform the worship, entering a liminal state. But precisely whose self is addressed here? Although on the most basic level it is the actor's, and also the character's and the consecrated individual's self, perhaps it is also the self of the entire community watching the performance. The circularity of the self parallels the narrative frame that corresponds to the ritual that starts and ends with the act of seeing: "at that time I saw."

After this initial moment, two concentric pūjā offerings are performed. They contain precisely the same ritual segments, consisting in turn of the same ritual units ("riteme"; see Michaels 2016): preparation of the seat for the divinity; invocation of the god/goddess; worship with flowers, water, and sandalwood; the offering of food. The first offering is addressed to the god Gaṇapati, after which follows the main pūjā, either for the goddess of knowledge, Sarasvatī, or for Brahma, the main god in the tēvāram of the performance *Parṇasālāṅkam* ("An Alcove of Leaves"). At the end, the remaining food is offered to the god of the leftover called Ucchiṣṭadeva in the acting manuals (*āṭṭaparakāram*), corresponding to Nirmālya of the Nampūtiri tēvāram. Finally, the sacrificial space is cleaned up and a last offering of flowers (*puṣpāñjali*) to the goddess Sarasvatī is performed.

### 2.3 *Back to the Narrative Embedding: "At That Time I Saw"*

After the *puṣpāñjali*, the narrative framing resumes, while the actor repeats the words with which he began ("at that time I saw"). What he sees now are not the ritual props, but his wife approaching him; as with the props before, the wife too is not physically present on stage. He evokes her presence in the perception of the audience. He hands over to her the rest of the offering, once again shifting smoothly from a narrative to a mimetic mode. Here the ritual ends, and tēvāram is completed.

Let us dwell on the sequence of actions, their symbolic correlation, and the intertextual references to the religious practice. First of all, no props appear on the stage; any objects the actor "sees" are invisible. It is primarily in this aspect that the stage performance differs from a religious ritual held at home.

29 The conch is one of the emblems of the god Viṣṇu and it is connected with the purifying waters. During ritual practices it can be used both as sacred container and as musical instrument.

In the case of the stage *tēvāram* it is the precision of the actor and the drummers, their skills as creators of a nonvisible reality, that induces in the audience the perception of all the paraphernalia. This absence of physical objects, filled with the gestures of the actor and the sounds of the drums, is emblematic of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. The empty stage filled with represented objects points specifically to the mimetic character of the stage *tēvāram*, which has often been understood as a mimesis of a ritual of the same name performed by *Nampūtiris*. Yet, I argue that as a quotation from the *Nampūtiri* ritual, the stage *tēvāram* transforms itself into an independent ritual apparently isomorphic to the one it seems to replicate. In fact, since the instruments – that is, objects and formulas – employed during the divine service are physically absent from the stage, we can call the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam tēvāram* a mimesis of the *Nampūtiri* ritual only insofar as the sequence of actions remains unchanged. The very components of the ritual phrase, however, are markedly altered according to the *Cākyārs* discourse.

The alteration takes place during the final part of the offering. In the ritual framework, the new order of reality that opens up during the invocation to the gods is extremely fragile, because in this moment the macrocosm and the microcosm come in contact with each other through the rite (Smith 1998). It is of paramount importance for the cosmic balance that the threshold represented by the ritual be properly closed, failure to do so even constituting a ritual crime. In the relevant *pūjā*, as practiced by the *Nampūtiris*, both services to *Gaṇapati* and to *Sarasvatī* are concluded with the final pouring of water.<sup>30</sup> In *Kūṭiyāṭṭam tēvāram*, the feeding (*nivēdya*) of *Sarasvatī* is properly concluded, whereas the same is *not* the case for *Gaṇapati*'s worship. The two worships are embedded one inside the other, representing two concentric circles. After the worship for *Gaṇapati*, which constitutes the external circle, we witness the service for *Sarasvatī*, the main deity. Then the actor pours water encircling the spot where the food (*koṭikkurtti vīlti*) was placed for the goddess *Sarasvatī*.<sup>31</sup> This action ends and seals her feeding. Since the end is a perilous step from the ritual perspective, this final gesture is a cardinal moment in the ritual procedure. On the stage, the same critical gesture is not carried out for the feeding of the god *Gaṇapati*. In the perception of *Cākyārs*, this omission is a striking feature of the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam tēvāram* that diverges from their knowledge of the *Nampūtiri*'s performance of the domestic ritual.

30 In some cases, *Nampūtiris* perform *udvāsa* (dismissal), representing the specular action to the invocation at the beginning (*āvāhana*). *Udvāsa* is not present in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam tēvāram* because the god is not invoked into a permanent image.

31 *koṭikkurtti vīlti*: local variant of *kuṭikkunīr* (literally, "water to drink").

What is the transformation that takes place during the stage *tēvāram*? Embedded in a liminal moment, a new order of reality is forged. Here, the offerings to the gods are performed. The *pūjā* is projected on stage, apparently mimicking a Nampūtiri's *pūjā*. In fact, it is a wholly new ritual. The difference is seemingly small: from the Cākṃyārs' perspective the service to Gaṇapati is not brought to its completion. A single gesture is not carried out. This missing gesture, however, is of tremendous value: the circular flow that is supposed to come to a conclusion is forever suspended. The end is postponed; better, the end is never to come. We could imagine a myriad *tēvārams* left floating, mitigating the "rigidity" of the ritual, and thereby setting in motion a transformative moment.

### 3 The Theatrical Level: The Two Sarasvatīs

Turning now from the ritual procedure toward the theatrical aspect, in this second level we are confronted with a different set of questions concerning the relationship between ritual and the dramaturgy of the theater plays to which the ritual belongs.<sup>32</sup> What role does the ritual play in the story? How is the theatrical mode a constitutive part of ritual performance? As we have seen earlier, the deictic phrase "At that time I saw" represents the narrative embedding of *tēvāram*. By way of framing, the ritual is placed at a certain moment in time: precisely when the actor sees all the ritual props. It reappears at the end, when the actor's wife arrives and he grants her part of the ritual offering; the *tēvāram* is again chained down to a specific moment in the present.

This narrative embedding is in turn linked to the story enacted on the stage. This is our key to understand the transformative nature of "ritual quotation." *Tēvāram* is not the mere reproduction of a religious service, a ritual segment inserted in the midst of the show. It is rather part of the theatrical event and has a strong aesthetic value.<sup>33</sup> This has two implications: the ritual is performed as

32 Dramaturgy not only in the sense of the plot developed by the text, but also, and more importantly, dramaturgy as the construction of the actions and events on the stage as a physical score (on *dramaturgy* and the German theatrical tradition, see Meldolesi and Molinari 2007; Bauman and Briggs 1990). On the relation between ritual and theater in the Western tradition, the comparative work of Schechner (2003), whose aim has been to translate and import elements of the Indian theatrical traditions both in the practice and in the theoretical reflection (2001), has been seminal. For an analysis of the interaction of ritual and theater in the Indian cultural area, see Bansat-Boudon 2020.

33 Here I understand aesthetic, an ambiguous term, in the sense of a cultural specific system to evaluate the beauty of artistic products and not in terms of theory of perception (as for the different values of the aesthetics of religion, see Grieser and Johnston 2017). All

an actor would carry it out, not a priest; and more significantly, the ritual is a component of the performance and must be understood in connection to it.<sup>34</sup> If we look at the way in which the narrative frame is bridged to the dramaturgical sequence, we notice that the frame changes depending on the act in which it is performed. This, in turn, shapes the dramaturgy itself.

How can we analyze this link? How do we address the multiform character of a performative corpus comprised of texts, oral knowledge, embodied knowledge, and practice? The texts and stage enactment are a living body of knowledge and practice. This performative corpus entails a different type of textuality that strives to be included in its own application, embedding the indication for its use and being neither descriptive nor prescriptive. In fact, the *ātṭaparakāram*, the acting manuals, belong to the *mise en scène* while containing their own application. These texts, together with the *kramadīpikā*, the stage manuals, are the foundational bricks of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam edifice.<sup>35</sup> They have been composed by the actors themselves and constitute a blueprint for the unfolding of the performance. In these manuals, the Sanskrit play is pulled apart and recomposed in a new dramaturgy. In order to understand the dynamic of staging a story in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam tradition, we therefore must examine this corpus and thereby comprehend its ritual component.

In the current repertoire of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, *tēvāram* occurs only in four performances: “The Drinking Game” (*Mattavilāsa*), “An Alcove of Leaves” (*Parṇaśālāṅkam*), “Through the Fire” (*Agnipraveśāṅkam*), and “The Adventures of a Child God” (*Bālacaritam*). I will focus on “Through the Fire,” and reconstruct how *tēvāram* is woven into the dramaturgy of the Sanskrit play.<sup>36</sup> The Kūṭiyāṭṭam piece “Through the Fire” is the seventh act of the Sanskrit drama

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actions have some aesthetic value. It is the degree to which this is true for a given action that determines whether the action is primarily aesthetic or not. By way of example, a rite has aesthetic value, but its main aim is to evoke divine presence. A theater performance, by contrast, mainly aims at creating a certain state in its audience.

34 In my field work, I witnessed *pūjā*, as well as a full *tēvāram*, performed by a *tantrin* (a Hindu priest); the cadence of the movements and their quality differ from those performed by actors.

35 The image of Kūṭiyāṭṭam as a building is not new: in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire, the construction of the hermitage displayed at the beginning of *Parṇaśālāṅkam* (first act of *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*) can be understood as a metadiscourse on the process of staging Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

36 The character who performs the *purappāṭ* in *Agnipraveśāṅkam* is not a *sūtradhāra*; rather, he is a *vidhyādhāra*, a kind of supernatural being. Yet the procedure is done according to the rules that apply to *sūtradhāra purappāṭ*.

*The Crest Jewel of Marvel* (*Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*) by Śaktibhadra.<sup>37</sup> It is about the fire ordeal of Sitā, so the theme of fire, particularly ritual fire, is present at many levels.<sup>38</sup> The actor(s) who created the manual for this act clearly played with the different ritual and dramaturgical layers of the story.<sup>39</sup>

As explained above, tēvāram takes place at the very beginning of the theater piece, before the commencement of the act. In the case of “Through the Fire,” the first scene is a kind of preamble. In the Sanskrit play that is used as the scenario for the Kūṭiyāṭṭam staging of the story, two demigods, a man and a woman, are in a great hurry. They must hasten to honor the mighty god Indra as they had almost forgotten their duty, being too intent on worshipping (*ādharayati*) Sarasvatī. It is this very goddess who is the main divinity of the pūjā performed in tēvāram.

In the acting manual (*āṭṭaparakāram*), the tēvāram is inserted just before the utterance of the first line of the Sanskrit play.<sup>40</sup> In the template provided by the manual, the actors playing the two semidivine beings enter the scene, and, as soon as the male actor starts the tēvāram (*‘pūjā tuṭaṇṇumpōl’*), the actress exits the stage. Once he finishes the tēvāram (*‘pūjā kaliṇṇāl’*), he recites the first line from the Sanskrit play *Agnipraveśāṅkam* (that is, act 7, scene 2, of *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*):

*Saudamini adyāpi tāvad vidyādaivatam ārādhatayā mayā nopalakṣito mahendrasevākālah.*

O Saudamini, until now I have been so greatly immersed in the worship of Sarasvatī that I neglected to the proper time for serving lord Indra.

37 Śaktibhadra was a ninth century playwriter, probably from South India, as suggested in the beginning of his own *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi* (prose after verse 2), where the actress comments on the geographical origin of the drama: “*ākāśaṃ prasūte puṣpam sikatāḥ tailam utpādayanti yadi dakṣiṇasyā dīśaḥ āgataṃ nāṭakanibandhanam*” (Flower from the sky, oil from sand, such is a play that comes from the South). For the relation between Śaktibhadra and Kūṭiyāṭṭam, see Bansat-Boudon 2019: 14–15.

38 Apart from the obvious consideration that Agni is part of the title itself and clearly an important element in the plot of the seventh act of the *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*, the ritual fire here might also have a further role to play. There are fires everywhere in the development of the act, different types of fire (different typologies). I plan to devote a separate article to the complex functions and understanding of fire in “Through the Fire.”

39 The *āṭṭaparakāram* that I use is from the Ammanur family; see Venugopalan 2009.

40 See Venugopalan 2009: 642.

According to the plotline, the worship of Sarasvatī is what distracted the two characters. And indeed, the actor has just performed a worship of Sarasvatī, namely, the *tēvāram*. The Sarasvatī of the textual sentence and the Sarasvatī of the *tēvāram* could thus very well overlap for the spectators, becoming one and the same. By way of cross-reference, the *tēvāram* that has just been performed becomes retroactively incorporated into the plot, since the audience can understand the *tēvāram* they have witnessed as the very worship of Sarasvatī to which the first line of the play alludes. *Tēvāram* itself has thus become part of an imaginary “page zero” in the Sanskrit drama and in turn acquires a new theatrical dimension.

The entire dramaturgic operation carried out by the acting manual is a *mise en abyme* of the ritual that relies on the narrative, mimetic register of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, and it is reinforced through intertextual references between the acting manual and the Sanskrit drama. For the spectator, the religious service from the manual and the ritual from the Sanskrit narrative come together. *Mārgi Madhu Cākyār* has developed further this interplay between the ritual and the play. In his production of the “Through the Fire,” the actress remained on the stage in the first part of *tēvāram*, handing over the invisible props for the ritual to the actor.<sup>41</sup> In this way, *tēvāram* further overlapped with the ritual that motivates the first line of the act.<sup>42</sup> The fluidity of stage *tēvāram* activates a transformation at the level of dramaturgy; the channel that is opened during *Gaṇapati pūjā*, on the level of the ritual performance, operates likewise for the actors on this second order of reality.

#### 4 The Social Level: Did You Take a Bath and Do the Ritual?

As pointed out above, the web on which *tēvāram* relies is also constituted by claims for social status and an ongoing dialog between individual imagination and collective expectations. Indeed, in this respect, the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance does not form the primary setting for *tēvāram*. In Kerala, *tēvāram* more commonly refers to a set of rituals practiced by the priestly groups, indicating

41 The performance took place in December 2017 in Moozhikkulam.

42 Different modifications of *tēvāram* are to be seen in *Mattavilāsa*, where the strong Śaiva nature of the whole drama (Salay 2019) clearly impinges upon the ritual process. In *Mattavilāsa* there are two *tēvārams*: one by the stage director (*sūtradhāra*), and one by the Śaiva devotee (*kapalin*). Particularly in the case of the Śaiva devotee's *tēvāram*, some of the props and gestures are specific Śaiva acts of devotion, for instance, the use of ashes.



daily worship, including pūjā, *sandhyāvandana*, and so forth.<sup>43</sup> It is associated in particular with Nampūtiris, whose tēvāram represents a point of reference for the Cākyār community.

The connection between these two communities constituted a starting point of this article and it is reflected in the way Cākyārs live and speak about their everyday interaction. The typical greeting to a Nampūtiri is to ask if he did tēvāram: “*Kuṭiyuṃ tēvāravuṃ kalīñṅō?*” (Did you take a bath and perform the tēvāram ritual?). On the contrary, those who do not belong to this caste, such as the actors (the Cākyārs) and all the other temple servants (*ampalavāsi*), are, at least in theory, not permitted to practice it.<sup>44</sup> However, when a Nampūtiri and a Cākyār meet on their way to the temple, they may very well greet each other with “*Tēvāram kalīñṅō?*” (Have you done tēvāram?). While the term may serve in this context as an underspecified noun for the religious service of pūjā, the issue at stake, however, is not that of the word’s pragmatic usage but rather of the various practices implied on the social level. To dismiss this example as a case of hypernym, as a broader, more generic term, would be to ignore a fundamental key to understanding the shared liminality of ritual and theater.

The institution of tēvāram contributes to configuring Cākyār social reality in more than one way. On the one hand, the entry of the stage director of “The Adventures of a Child God,” which contains the Kūṭiyāṭṭam tēvāram, represents an important social rite of passage for the actors (see Śliwczynska 2007b). On the other hand, beside the Kūṭiyāṭṭam tēvāram, Cākyārs can actually perform a ritual called tēvāram not only on stage, but also in their everyday life. At the same time, these two tēvāram practices are connected by a clear hierarchy. An actor can perform the everyday ritual at home only after he has enacted Kūṭiyāṭṭam tēvāram on stage (see Johan 2014: vol. 2, 140). Cākyārs take the tēvāram to be a ritual practice belonging to the Nampūtiris’ community, and they consider themselves entitled to carry it out, but once it has inhabited the space of the theater. This sequence of activation implies that the dialog

43 The *sandhyāvandana* or *sandhyā* is a ritual practiced by Brahmins at *sandhyā* (twilight), the three conjunctions of the day (morning, noon, and evening). In the Nampūtiri practice they speak of just two *sandhyāvandana*, in the morning and in the evening; these two moments are considered critical points of the day. See the definition of tēvāram offered by Kāṇippayyūr Śaṅkaran Nampūtirippāṭu: “*ā vākkirre sāmānyamāya artham ‘sandhyāvandanam mutal japa, namaskāram, pūja, puṣpāñjali mutalāya devakāryañnal’ ennākunnu*” (2015: 1:146).

44 Personal communication of Madhu Madhava Cākyār. A similar conception is expressed in Johan 2014: vol. 2, 139–140.



between different communities finds its concrete referent in the ritual level of a Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance.

Moreover, once we pay more attention to the role that *tēvāram* plays within the Kerala socioreligious matrix, we will see that in the hands of Cākyārs, *tēvāram* proves to be powerful enough to act as a countermeasure against the projected caste hierarchy with Nampūtiris at its top.

In addition to its function as part of the theatrical practice, the entry of the stage director in “The Adventures of a Child God” – of which the stage *tēvāram* constitutes an element – represents the Cākyār’s initiatory rite (*araṇṇerram*). Only after a boy has performed the *araṇṇerram* can he undergo the religious initiation rite so as to become a member of the caste (*jāti*) of actors. In this sense, the Kūṭiyāṭṭam *tēvāram* marks a central moment in the social and religious life of this community. Religious beliefs and practices still exert great power in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam community. The stage performance of *tēvāram* during the initiation (*araṇṇerram*) forms part of a socioreligious initiation into the Hindu community. In this respect, the ritual practice connects the two orders of reality represented by the theater and the religious-social matrix.

We have not yet reached, however, the core of the knot that binds ritual, theater, and society where Cākyārs articulate *tēvāram* as an instrument in their identity construction. As noted, the peculiarity of this ritual is that an actor can also practice *tēvāram* offstage. The ritual on stage thus deeply affects the everyday life of the actors. Once a Cākyār has carried out his initiation on the stage (*araṇṇerram*), and his religious initiation (*upanayana*), he can perform *tēvāram* at home. This ritual is then performed every day by a member of the household on behalf of all the others. The last allegedly occurs only if the family resides in its ancestral home and thus has access to a shrine with a *tēvāram* statue (*tēvāram bimba*). *Tēvāram* pertains only to the male actors. Even today, though Kūṭiyāṭṭam is taught in government institutions and to anyone who is willing to learn, *tēvāram* is not part of the curriculum. Only an individual who belongs to the Cākyār caste can learn it. In this sense, the ritual performed on stage bears social significance for the community of actors, who can in this way appropriate a ritual normally belonging only to the Nampūtiris.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam *tēvāram* changes the nature of *tēvāram* at large and, in this way, the socioreligious landscape of the Cākyār community. But it must first be carried out on stage. *Tēvāram* as a religious service, as a ritual performed by the Cākyārs, is both initiated and established as such by its performance on stage. Cākyārs are legitimized through the performance to practice *tēvāram* in their lives. That is to say, the stage is the space where the everyday ritual is generated, and not the other way around. One might also say that the stage is the space where a different social reality is created.

## 5 Closing the Circles

Through an investigation of Kūṭiyāṭṭam tēvāram as a ritual quotation, we have looked at its connections with ritual practices and shared beliefs. In the analysis of the procedure of tēvāram, the “open nature” that is produced by the nonclosing of the Gaṇapati pūjā features as a mark of its novel and transformative nature. But the intertextual references do not operate only at the level of ritual practice; they also link prescriptive manuals and dramaturgical scripts, as we have seen in the case of *Agnipravesāṅkam* and the two overlapping cases of Sarasvatī worship. The performative corpus to which tēvāram belongs creates a space for variation that modifies both the plot and the ritual practice in accordance with the play in which it is embedded. Tēvāram as ritual quotation is embedded in the script of a new performance that diverges from the one configured by the Sanskrit drama and localized in the theater practice within the Kerala social matrix. Tēvāram, like other ritual segments, is fundamental to the dramaturgical development of the performance that can thus be understood only in the context of the ongoing dialog between the Cākyār and Nampūtiri communities.

Against the Nampūtiri domestic ritual, it is this new ritual, performed on stage, that enables the Cākyārs to appropriate tēvāram as their domestic ritual. In fact, the Kūṭiyāṭṭam tēvāram takes place at a liminal moment and it deeply affects the reality outside the stage. At the same time, the Nampūtiri tēvāram, which features as point of reference for the Cākyārs, is deeply modified when enacted on stage. A new type of action emerges that takes part in the theatrical and ritual mode and acts as a structuring device both on stage and in ordinary life.

In conclusion, tēvāram, one of the ritual segments of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, functions as a quotation taken from other bodies of knowledge and practice, while activating a web of intertextual references. Such ritual quotation not only interacts with performative practices, religious beliefs, and prescriptive manuals, but plays an important role in the shaping of socioreligious structures. Thus, it is used as a claim in the positioning of individuals within the social matrix and as a tool of negotiation between different communities. In being recreated on stage, tēvāram acts as an interface between social groups. Understanding tēvāram, the modalities through which it articulates the locality of the performative tradition, and its role in the social dialog is necessary to grasp the constitutive function of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, which represents a fundamental component of its local character and from which stems the transformative nature of this temple-theater art.

### Appendix: Tēvāram Sequence as Performed by the Actor on Stage

Action	Ritual segment or action (riteme)	Expressive mode
At that time I saw	At that time I saw all the objects necessary for the worship of the gods. What are they all? Perfumed water, flowers, sandalwood, oil lamp, food for offering, a plank, etc.	Narrative
Preparation	x is taken and put down ( <i>eṭutt̃vacc̃</i> ) – plank/board ( <i>palaka</i> ) – goblet, water vessel ( <i>kiṇṭi</i> ) – tripod for the conch ( <i>śaṃkhukāl̃</i> ) – conch ( <i>śaṃkh̃</i> ) – sandalwood ( <i>candanaṃ</i> ) – flowers ( <i>pūṽ</i> ) – lamp ( <i>viḷakk̃</i> )	Mimesis
Worship of Gaṅgā	– Cleaning of the conch ( <i>śaṃkh̃</i> ) – Invocation of Gaṅgā into the conch ( <i>Gaṅgaye āvāhic̃</i> )	Ritual practice
Creation of the sacred spot ( <i>tīrtham̃</i> )	– Murmuring eight times ( <i>eṭṭuru japicc̃</i> ) – Writing an “r” on the palm (“ra” <i>eḷuti</i> ) – Pouring water from the conch into the goblet ( <i>śaṃkh̃/kiṇṭi veḷḷam oḷicc̃</i> ) – Making everything clean ( <i>ellām śuddhivirutti</i> )	
Ātmārādhana Gaṇapati pūjā	Self-worship (consecration of the devotee) Preparation of the seat ( <i>piṭhampūjā</i> ) Invocation of Gaṇapati ( <i>Gaṇapati āvāhic̃</i> ) Worship of Gaṇapati ( <i>Gaṇapati ārādhana</i> ) Feeding of Gaṇapati ( <i>Gaṇapati nivēdyaṃ</i> ) – Preparation of the spot for the food – Food is placed – Double circle between Gaṇapati and the food to establish a link – The five breath ( <i>prānāhuti</i> ) – Salutation ( <i>tolut̃</i> )	Ritual practice
Sarasvatī pūjā	Preparation of the seat ( <i>piṭhampūjā</i> ) Invocation of Sarasvatī ( <i>Sarasvatī āvāhic̃</i> ) Worship of Sarasvatī ( <i>Sarasvatī ārādhana</i> )	

(cont.)

Action	Ritual segment or action (riteme)	Expressive mode
<i>Ucchiṣṭa deva</i>	Feeding of Sarasvatī ( <i>Sarasvatī nivēdya</i> )	
	Preparation of the seat ( <i>piṭhampūjā</i> )	
	Feeding of Ucchiṣṭa ( <i>Ucchiṣṭa nivēdya</i> )	
Closing of <i>Sarasvatī pūjā</i>	Encircling the area where there was food with water	
Cleaning of the space	Sprinkling of water ( <i>veḷḷam taḷicc</i> )	
Offering of flowers	Consecration of the spot	
Offering of flowers	Offering of flowers to Sarasvatī ( <i>puṣpāñjali</i> )	
At that time I saw	The actor sees his wife approaching	Narrative embedding
	He gives her part of the <i>prasāda</i> (offering)	Mimesis
	Offering to all gods	Narrative / mimesis
Salutation	<i>Namaskāram</i>	

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