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**When Theatre Makes the Ritual Work  
Imitation, Materialization and Reactualization in the Malayali  
Ritual Theatre Muṭiyēttu'**

SUMMARY: In Muṭiyēttu', a ritual theatre performed in some Hindu temples of central Kerala (South India), ritual and theatre are intricately woven to form a cluster that plays a well-defined role in the cult of the goddess Bhadrakālī. It 'works' as a ritual because of the realistic theatricalization of key portions of her myth, the generation of sacrificial violence and ritual pollution, as well as the embodiment of the goddess using an array of musical, dramatic and performative components. With its overt theatrical essence, Muṭiyēttu' displays all the features corresponding to and expected by Bhadrakālī in a specific condition and is thereby seen as a most effective offering to appease, please and worship her. The ethnographic data provided in this article highlight how the Hindu logic of imitation allows the materialization of the goddess—and its culmination in possession—using theatrical and performative tools to create life, hence giving substance and ritual legitimacy to Bhadrakālī's physical manifestation that is at the core of the power assigned to Muṭiyēttu' in its traditional context.

KEYWORDS: Muṭiyēttu', ritual theatre, Bhadrakālī, goddess worship, possession, Kerala, South India.

Muṭiyēttu' is a ritual theatre performed as an offering in various temples dedicated to the Hindu goddess Bhadrakālī in Central Kerala (South India). It is a theatre in its shape, a sequential enactment of the myth of *Dārikavadham*<sup>1</sup> ('Slaying of Dārikan') with seven scenes

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<sup>1</sup> The myth of *Dārikavadham* forms the backdrop of Bhadrakālī's personality and worship in the popular Malayali Hindu scene. It recounts

following a relatively fixed scenography, using theatre props and a musical accompaniment of temple drums and cymbals. The performance displays seven characters played by men belonging to the intermediate *mārār* and *kuruppu* castes (responsible for the musical and pictorial service in Brahmin temples). The main character, goddess Bhadrakālī, is impersonated by the senior *muṭiyēttukar*, who wears her multi-layered costume and heavy wooden headgear (*valiya muṭi*), displays her make-up with colour patches, small dried lime spikes and fresh flowers on his face and carries her attributes (sickle shaped sword, fangs, metal anklets). To fully grasp the argument made in this paper, let me state straight away that, from the point of view of practitioners and devotees, the senior *muṭiyēttukar* is possessed by the goddess throughout the performance. After the *valiya muṭi*, a permanent receptacle of her power, has been put on his head, his body is infused with a portion of her *caitanya* (consciousness) and *śakti* (active power). He is a priori not acting as the goddess, he is the goddess—but we will see that the boundary between being and acting is very tenuous. *Muṭiyēttu* is then also a ritual endowed with the efficacy to make

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how Bhadrakālī was created by Śiva in the context of a cosmic war opposing the gods to the *asuras* with the purpose of defeating the *asura* king, Dārikan. After a long and almost hopeless battle, the goddess, supported by a horde of evil spirits, beheads Dārikan and is sent to earth to receive worship from men as a reward. This myth is known, heard, seen and read all over Kerala, at all levels of the Malayali society, and is used by various communities of different status, each having their own recitations, narrations, songs and performances recounting this myth (see Pasty 2010: chap. 3). While equivalences between this story and pan-Indian textual corpuses such as the *Devīmāhātmyam* or the *Liṅgapurāna* are undeniable (cf. Tarabout 1986: 122; Caldwell 1999: 19; Aubert 2004: 71; van Brussel 2016), I prefer to look at this myth in its local dimension (cf. Richman 2001; Sax 2002) and from an anthropological perspective, as a “living tradition” (Blackburn and Flueckiger 1989: 1), an independent oral corpus, fundamentally Malayali in its form, topics and powers, as do most of my non-Sanskrit speaking informants, for whom the pan-Indian Hinduism and literature are but abstract realities.

the goddess present and achieve the target of worship. We could then apprehend it as a theatrical performance superimposed with a ritual meaning. But the complexity goes further, as the definitions and boundaries between theatre and ritual, and between imitation and reality, are blurred and overlapping.

Muṭiyēttu' being an oral tradition predominantly nurtured by grassroots realities as well as popular and personalised Hindu practices and beliefs, the data used in this article is first-hand information gathered during various fieldworks conducted in central Kerala since 2002;



Fig. 1: The goddess (left) and the mighty Dārikan (right) in Muṭiyēttu'  
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the analysis also partially draws from portions of my PhD Thesis (Pasty 2010). As in all my works, I chose to give particular attention to the personal views and experiences of the people, with a majority of men, who revolve around the goddess temples and play particular roles in the ritual offerings conducted for her: the *muṭiyēttukars* (those who perform Muṭiyēttu'), who mainly stem from four *mārār* and *kuruppu*' families who share the hereditary right to perform Muṭiyēttu' in a range of goddess temples; the male temple authorities and officiants (Brahmins, *mārār*, *kuruppu*' and *nāyar*), who coordinate and to some extent participate in the performances; and of course

the devotees, men and women, of all age groups, from intermediate castes, mostly educated, who attend and potentially sponsor the performances in the hope to derive personal benefits for themselves, their families and their businesses. The analysis and conclusions presented here are therefore to be seen within this delimited frame, even if they may partly apply to the broader context of popular Hindu worship in South India and the ritual performing arts connected to it.

### **About blurred categories**

Within the landscape of the performing arts traditional to the southernmost Indian state, a distinction is made at the terminological, conceptual and practical levels between art forms that serve worship and art forms that entertain. Terminologically, this distinction translates into *anuṣṭhāna kalās*, i.e. ‘arts of observance’, and *dṛśya kalās*, i.e. ‘arts that deserve to be seen’ or what my informants call *kalā paripāṭi* (‘stage programs’). The *anuṣṭhāna kalās* are “centred on the presence considered to be real of invoked gods [and] spirits” (Aubert 2004: 52). They “share with sacrificial practice and *pūjā* ritual efficacy as their primary goal and organizational center” and are differentiated by the “degree to which overtly dramatic, theatrical, and performative elements are used to establish the mediating bridge and to accomplish [their] efficacious end” (Richmond, Swan and Zarrilli 1990: 124). *Muṭiyēttu*’ is one of these. On the other side, the *dṛśya kalās* are valued for their aesthetics and entertaining character; no direct divine presence is suggested here, at least not in the body of a possessed performer. However, to decide which art belongs in which category is quite a matter of point of view, and on top of that a tricky task. In India, theatre is standardly dedicated to the gods. Most performing arts from the region contain some sort of reference to the divine and can to some extent be understood as serving worship (see for example the Sanskrit drama *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, e.g. Johan in this volume). The place and context of performance (temple compound vs European type of stage) are also no determining criteria, since both types of arts can be conducted during temple festivals and can be interpreted as playing a role in the cult to

a deity;<sup>2</sup> and the possibility of conducting a Muṭiyēttu' on a European stage for a foreign audience neither contradicts nor annuls its ritual purpose, *au contraire* (Pasty 2010). The fact is that most performing arts to be found in Kerala are both *anuṣṭhāna* and *drśya* at the same time: the ritual dimension of the performing arts does not exclude their ability to entertain, and entertainment clearly serves devotion to a deity and contributes to the very purpose of the worship, by pleasing and enticing her.

In the Malayali context, defining an art as ritual is also a matter of prestige. For the *muṭiyēttukars*, *kalā paripāṭis* have clearly less value, because they are “just for fun” and characterize a negative development and dislocation from the initial ritual purpose. Kathakaḷi is for them a ritual art that has lost its soul by exacerbating its entertaining features to please audiences. And yet Kathakaḷi performances are still today commissioned as votive offerings in several temples, as in the Maruttōrvattam temple of Cherthala. The value-oriented negotiation of the ritual dimensions of the arts in this region has also been underscored by other scholars. Zarrilli (Zarrilli 1979) and Narayanan (Narayanan 2006) showed that the Asian context exhibits a remarkable tendency to exaggerate the ritual dimension of the arts at the expense of other important aspects. Motivations range from a claim to authenticity and legitimacy beyond the artistic sphere, to the deliberate construction of an ancestral past rooted in primitive religiosity. There is also no shortage of exaggeration and distortion in the case of discourses about Muṭiyēttu'. The definition of Muṭiyēttu' as an *anuṣṭhāna kalā*, which is passionately defended by the *muṭiyēttukars* and their audiences, does not seem to be questioned; but its entertaining traits, which

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<sup>2</sup> Besides the ritual part of the program, temple festivals are also composed of a series of ‘entertainments’, such as classical and popular music concerts and profane theatre performances (Nṛttanāṭakam, Cākyārkūttu', ‘Balley', etc.), given in and around the temple compound. These entertainments are usually sponsored (sometimes as votive offerings) by individuals, families, communities or even companies, who thereby partake in the attraction of the deity's festival and by extension in her pleasure.

are outstanding and fundamental for its ritual function, are largely downplayed and relegated to a secondary role. Nambiar described Muṭiyēttu' as "the most developed form of *kālipūjā*" (Nambiar 1989: 53). Venu (Venu 2002: 101) and Remesh (Remesh 2005: 83) wrote that it must have been a rite before taking its present theatrical form. Achyutha Menon considers Muṭiyēttu' as an elaborate form of *kaḷameluttupāttu*<sup>3</sup> (Achyutha Menon 1943, I: 60). The validity of these assertions is not what matters here; the field of Muṭiyēttu', which is predominantly an oral and popular tradition, presents very little tangible evidence to nurture any discussion about its origins. But viewing Muṭiyēttu' as an extended and theatricalized form of worship presupposes that the theatrical and performative elements are secondary additions to a ritual core. Yet they are the elements that determine power and efficacy of the performance in the local understanding and are thereby inherent to its very identity.

What differentiates Muṭiyēttu' from the neighbouring *anuṣṭhāna kalās* in which a divinity is materialized via dancing and singing is the combination between the manifestation of the goddess via the body of a possessed specialist, and the sequential, chronologically accurate, continuous<sup>4</sup> and realistic enactment of the myth of *Dārikavadham* using a broad array of theatrical elements, including a relatively fixed scenography and choreography. It is an interactive narration of the goddess' myth, a fixed, active and to some extent realistic reactualization of the cosmic combat opposing the goddess to her mighty opponent, the *asura* Dārikan.<sup>5</sup> Muṭiyēttu' is a powerful superposition of theatre

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<sup>3</sup> A set of powder drawings, songs and *pūjā* performed as part of the regular worship to the goddess.

<sup>4</sup> The story is enacted with a linear progression, without any interruption or intersection of other items, unlike for instance in *Kāliyūttu*' (see note 5), in which sequences are performed separately on distinct days and are interwoven with other stories.

<sup>5</sup> The state of Kerala sees a number of *anuṣṭhāna kalās* based on the myth of *Dārikavadham*, all separate traditions carried out by specific communities. Among them, some, such as Muṭiyēttu', Bhadrakālī Tiyyāttu' or Kāliyūttu'

and ritual, in which theatre literally fleshes out the ritual manifestation

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reactualize the most active portions of the myth (fight, beheading of the demon) in a chronological way making more or less extensive use of theatrical and performative tools, such as linear or non-linear progression, scenography, acting, facial expressions, dance, martial feats, songs, speech and music, to give substance to the story of the goddess and achieve the devotional target in various ways. In all of these, the performer wearing the goddess' attire is said to be possessed by her. *Bhadrakāḷi Tiyyāṭṭu*' (Chandrasahsan 1989; Contri 2003), which is conducted by the *tiyyāṭṭunṇis* (high level temple servants) of central Kerala, chronologically narrates a part of the myth following the flashback method. The main performer, wearing *Bhadrakāḷi*'s costume, make-up and headgear, narrates her combat sitting in front of an oil lamp symbolising Śiva and using stylized hand gestures (*mudrās*). This highly abstract, ritualized and slow motion performance relatively ignores the martial/violent aspects of the goddess and myth. *Kāḷiyūttu*' (Ramkumar 1986; Ajitkumar 2004), which is exclusively conducted in the temple of Śārkkaradēvi (NW Trivandrum district) by the *ponnara paṇikkar* family, enacts the entire myth with three characters (the goddess, *Dārikan* and the sage *Nāradan*), but separates the sequences in time, intersecting them with other stories. For the most active sequence, the performers incarnating *Dārikan* and *Bhadrakāḷi* vividly enact the final battle starting with a long verbal fight standing on two 20-meters high wooden platforms, then moving on to a realistic weapon fight on the ground. Other *amuṣṭhāna kalās* are built around a single episode of the myth that is not enacted but serves as thematic background. The end of the myth says that after killing her opponent, *Bhadrakāḷi* returned to her father's abode in such a tremendous fury that all gods strived to calm her down, notably by showing her grotesque caricatures of herself. This is what is recalled in *Paṭayaṇi* performed in the Pathanamtitta and Allepey districts (Tarabout 1986: chap. 5; Lambert 2004; Aubert 2004: 123–144). Here, the goddess and her *bhūta* soldiers are materialized through a set of stylised dances performed by villagers carrying a variety of masks. In *Teyyam* (Kurup 1973; Freeman 1991), the myth of the goddess only appears at the verbal level via the songs performed to highly ritualized dances, using heavy make-up, costumes and headgears. The purpose of *Teyyam* is not to reactualize the deity's story, but to materialize her via a possessed specialist and allow devotees to interact with her. The corpus of *Teyyam* is composed of a large number of independent stories linked with a variety of gods (*teyyams*)—the *Tāi Paradēvata Teyyam* performed by the low caste *vaṇṇans* is among the few dedicated to *Bhadrakāḷi* (Nambiar 1993).

of the deity and serves the ritual with a concrete breeding ground and structure on which to unfold, notably by providing a tangible support for personal devotion and institutional worship. As I will demonstrate, the theatrical reactualization of the myth and the cumulation of artistic means to give substance to the recreated cosmic battle is what provides Muṭiyēttu' with strength to act upon the goddess, according to the local understanding. The pivotal logic here is that imitation used in a controlled and ritually framed fashion, and especially perfection in imitation, creates life, i.e. materializes what it strives to imitate in a most realistic way. The more complete and faithful the imitation—here imitation of the goddess in motion and of the mythical actions in their full violent and literally polluting magnitude—the stronger the vividness and power of what is given life. In the context of Muṭiyēttu', this logic establishes the ritual validity and power of both the physical representation of the deity and the enactment of her story using theatrical and performative tools. Let us first dwell on the physical representation.

### **Being or looking like?**

Discussing the boundaries between ritual and theatre from the point of view of Muṭiyēttu' requires a back and forth movement between the realms of imitation and embodiment, being and showing. These are blurred since 'being' and 'looking like' serve the same purpose of making something real and constructing the legitimacy of this reality. Possession in Muṭiyēttu' is based on the idea that imitation, i.e. the iconic realization of the goddess *is* the goddess.<sup>6</sup> Here, as Freeman wrote for Teyyam, the imitation of the divinity "is not undertaken or experienced as a mere substitute for some more authentic, original, or real discursive or doctrinal existence of the god"; on the contrary, mimesis has a real power of creation and transformation allowing the practitioner to be "viewed as a real remanifestation of the [god's] enduring reality" (Freeman 2003: 177–178). Theatrical and performative tools have a key role to play here. In Muṭiyēttu' as well as in neighbouring

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<sup>6</sup> This only involves the main character of the goddess and not the other six.

*anuṣṭhāna kalās* (such as Teyyam), there is an admitted equivalence, both at the discursive and at the conceptual level, between the “phenomenal bodily form [of the deity] given shape through the costuming on the [performer]’s body” and the “ontological being of the actual [deity]” (Freeman 2003: 147). This was beautifully underscored by a discussion I had with *muṭiyēttukars*. They argued that the incarnation of the goddess during *Muṭiyēttu*’ is of a higher level than that of the *veḷiccappātu*’ (the institutional oracle officiating in the goddess temples), for the reason that the latter *only* wears attributes of the goddess and speaks for her without seeking to resemble her neither in appearance nor in actions. His personification of Bhadrakālī is therefore incomplete,<sup>7</sup> so they believe, unlike that of the *muṭiyēttukar*, who turns into the incarnate goddess, who is then ‘really there’, not only because the performer<sup>8</sup> looks like her, but also because he acts in a way as to make the public believe that he *is* her. For this reason, they believe that the share of *caitanya* and *śakti* that enters his body during performance is higher than that received by the *veḷiccappātu*’.

The equivalence between the physical representation of a deity and her ontological body largely pervades the entire field of divine representation via human and non-human receptacles. I was told that a stone idol of Garuḍan (Viṣṇu’s eagle) of a temple in Southern Ernakulam district was made with such perfection and fidelity to its live model that it came to life and flew away. A new idol was then commissioned with a broken wing to alter its perfection and prevent another escape. The same risk is inherent in any representation of the goddess, such as the powder drawings (*kaḷam*) done in her temples, the proportions of which are purposely altered to avoid inadvertently

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<sup>7</sup> This is obviously an opinion not shared by the temple authorities for whom the *veḷiccappātu*’ is the official, ritually prepared and divinely selected representative of the deity (Seth 1995; Tarabout 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Let’s add that the *muṭiyēttukar* incarnating the goddess is trained, experienced and physically and ritually prepared (abstinence, vegetarian diet, devotion, etc.) to take this role (Pasty 2010: chap. 7).

materializing the goddess with her tremendous powers in this setting. Some researchers (Tarabout 1993: 253; Rajagopalan 2003: 32) relate the information according to which the main *muṭiyēttukar* would keep dirt under his headgear or under his shirt to alter the level of purity of the human receptacle and thus prevent an overflow of *śakti*. The performers I interviewed, however, all denied this, calling it a very risky endeavor when everybody knows that the goddess hates impurity and punishes those who deliberately sully any representation of her. In Muṭiyēttu', perfection in the personification of the deity overtly using theatrical means is the openly declared target.

The culmination of the physical representation/ontological body equivalence is the phenomenon of possession. Even here, observing and listening to the *muṭiyēttukars* make it obvious that theatre also plays an important part in this *a priori* spontaneous and super-human transformation. The embodiment process<sup>9</sup> through which the senior *muṭiyēttukar* becomes the goddess has an overtly choreographed and theatricalized dimension that led researchers (e.g. Tarabout 1993: 253–254) and foreign spectators to raise doubts about the authenticity of his possession. When the *muṭiyēttukars* describe this process, they refer to attitudes and symptoms that challenge the limits between theatre and institutional possession. But regardless of the amount of artistically tinted human intervention involved in the process, we are still moving within the definition of possession shared by the people who perform, sponsor, and attend the performances, and which is thus unanimously accepted as such. Tarabout wrote that “acting, recognized as such, is only possible outside possession” (Tarabout 1998: 297), but this opinion ignores the logic of the majority of *muṭiyēttukars* for whom acting is one of the key ingredients for making the goddess present.

As already mentioned, the reality of the presence of the goddess, i.e. the reality of possession by the main performer, is the main criterion for defining Muṭiyēttu' as *anuṣṭhāna kalā*. Yet how far the performer has to interfere in this process and use his creative abilities and artistic

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of this process, see Pasty 2010: chap. 7.

skills to partake in it varies from one group of *mutiyēttukars* to another. The traditionalists claim that they are entirely moved by a portion of the goddess' active power. The modernists explain that the personified goddess is above all their creation requiring a fundamental acting talent. Their 'job' is to act so as to make the public believe that they are inhabited by the goddess, and yet there is never an idea of faking here.



Fig. 2: The goddess during her solo sequence  
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The goddess is first invoked in the *mutiyēttukar*'s mind, where she is given a mental body through prayers and visualization. From there he constructs her physical body by putting on her costume, applying her make-up, carrying her head-gear and most of all by *acting* like her. For the *mutiyēttukars*, being the goddess in a literal sense means presentifying her in a comprehensive way by restituting her physical appearance, her nature and her definitional behavior. When these elements are gathered, there is no need for any further demonstration of the goddess' actual presence in their bodies.

An important dimension of the personification of the goddess—and of the theatricality of possession—in *Mutiyēttu*' is that it is prepared and non-spontaneous. Embodying the goddess is learned like a theatre role. It involves a fixed choreography and text. The audience shares this prebuilt knowledge and expects the gestures and actions to take place according to these established patterns. The performance progress is fixed and is not adapted to the development of possession. The interruption of possession at the end of the battle sequence

(an assistant abruptly removes the headgear from the head of the main *muṭiyēttukar*) as well as the following liminal phase during which the performer struggles heavily before giving in to exhaustion (see below), follow a prebuilt schema with predefined gestures and movements repeated for each performance. Possession is here accepted as authentic as long as it sticks to the fixed mechanics of its establishment and interruption—using the traditional headgear as the main vector of the deity’s power—is set within the codified framework of performance and is handled by specialists. It is translated through exactitude in ritual *and* theatrical actions, thereby transcribing the same “heightened sense of awareness and performative acuity” that Freeman described for the institutional oracle (Freeman 1991: 322). For the *muṭiyēttukars*, this framework alone serves as marker of the authenticity of possession and, therefore, of the reality of the presence of the deity. No need of any further proof, unlike with Teyyam performers or *veḷiccappāṭu*’, whose possession needs to be authenticated by the display of superhuman and oracular powers as well as extraordinary physical strength and resistance (Ashley 1979: 109; Tarabout 1999: 341–343). Old stories told by *muṭiyēttukars* and devotees have it that a performer interpreting Dārikan was killed after the one incarnating the goddess was overwhelmed with an excessive dose of divine power. These stories alone serve for them as proof of the reality and strength of possession in *Muṭiyēttu*’.

### **How theatre helps to achieve the ritual target of the performance**

Long-term observation and discussions with the persons involved in *Muṭiyēttu*’ clearly underscore that the theatrical and performative tools partake a great deal in the construction of the ritual validity and power of the enactment of Bhadrakālī’s story. Here, we can literally say that the ritual, i.e. the performance, achieves its target because of its theatrical components. This target is twofold: pleasing the goddess and nourishing the devotion of her devotees, the sum of which makes an ordered cosmic realm and peaceful living conditions for all. Let us start with the devotees.

An important characteristic of *Muṭiyēttu*' as performed by three of the four families sharing the traditional rights to its practice is the active participation of the audience composed of devotees. Part of them join around Bhadrakālī and Dārikan to personify their respective subjects as well as the horde of spirits assisting the goddess. During their solo sequences and the last battle sequence, male devotees run and jump around the characters, shouting the traditional *ārppuvīlis* ("arppuuuu ho ho ho") to 'boost' them. The performance provides the devotees with a physical experience of Bhadrakālī's battle through its vivid reactualization, and moreover an 'experience of the feeling' of her presence in their midst via the possessed *muṭiyēttukar*. For some informants, the costume and make-up worn by the *muṭiyēttukar* incarnating the goddess have become definitional of her physical appearance in their mental representation: this is how they visualize Bhadrakālī when praying or when participating in her regular worship at temples.<sup>10</sup> The realistic and personified staging of both goddess and myth is then key to the spilling over of the performance aesthetics and characteristics into daily life and individual devotion. For the devotees, the theatrical staging of Bhadrakālī in action is an important media to see the goddess fighting in the flesh and materializing her mighty *personae* in the shape of a tangible being they can literally feel, touch and support. The importance of this tangible materialization culminates in the final blessing sequence, during which devotees have direct physical contact with her and receive blessing and protection from her hands.

In addition, the performance gives devotees an ultimate devotional experience. It could be described as an extended form of *darśan*,

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<sup>10</sup> As detailed elsewhere (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2016), the way devotees represent themselves Bhadrakālī is a mix of a commonly shared picture largely influenced by local popular and institutional iconography (posters, paintings, idols, etc.), a more particularized picture attached to a specific divine incarnation in a given temple with the iconography, religious routine and stories peculiar to her, and a very personalised picture infused with private experiences and inclinations. The physical representation of the goddess through *Muṭiyēttu*' particularly converges with the second and third level.

i.e. the “central act of Hindu worship [...] [that consists in] stand[ing] in the presence of the deity and behold[ing] the image with one’s own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity” (Eck 1998: 3). This is not just about a mere exchange of gazes, for “[b]eholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, as Babb puts it, “[t]o see a deity as one is seen by that deity [...] allows the devotee to take in, in a manner of speaking to drink with the eyes, the deity’s own current of seeing [...] and [...] to gain special access to the power of [this] superior being” (Babb 1981: 396–397). Then, like the *Devīmāhātmyam* or the *Rāmāyana*, the myth of Dārikavadham is endowed with a power of realization of the deity (Tarabout 1986: 122). Reading the myth, hearing it told or chanted, having its printed version at home and worshipping it, even just holding it, confers prosperity, material wealth, harmony, knowledge, progeny, protection from sins, evil spirits, diseases and even death (Swami Mridananda 1979: 58–59). This power extends to the many usages of the myth, be it the minimal forms in which the myth is merely recited or sung, or the elaborate forms in which it is theatricalized (Pasty 2010: chap. 3). For my informants, hearing or seeing a theatricalization of the myth such as *Muṭiyēttu*’ is a direct source of divine blessing paralleled with the rites performed for a deity. Attending one performance a year is equivalent to attending daily worship throughout the year. Many Malayalis, and among them many young people who live abroad, set their annual leave in this period to be back home when *Muṭiyēttu*’ is conducted in their native place. They say that if the devotee has only one day to spare for worshipping the goddess, he should select the day of *Muṭiyēttu*’. And this beneficial impact does not necessarily involve devotion or knowledge, or even the deliberate will to be there: during performances given for a profane non-Hindu audience abroad, the *muṭiyēttukars* explained that the members of the public receive the same benefits as Hindu Malayalis in a Kerala temple by the simple fact of being physically exposed to the theatricalization of the goddess’ myth, by having their senses filled with the sounds, pictures, smells, sensations and impressions created by *Muṭiyēttu*’.

Another ingredient of the pivotal role played by the theatrical elements of Muṭiyēttu' in serving the devotees' devotion is the fact that it nurtures, deepens and exhibits the relationship established between them and the deity. Nowadays, performances are predominantly given as *valipātu*' (votive offering).<sup>11</sup> They are sponsored by individuals in response to a wish granted by the deity in exchange for the promise of a performance paid by the individual in question. The contract established between the devotee and the goddess until the promise is fulfilled forms an integral part of the trustful, straightforward and mutually benefitting and compelling relationship to the deity that devotees described (Pasty 2010: chap. 4). The realistic and personified staging of the myth of the goddess in Muṭiyēttu' is a temporary materialization and apogee of this bond. The performance fulfils the promise, in that it publicly acknowledges and demonstrates the reception of the benefit that was wished for; it thereby serves as proof of the sponsor's devoutness and of the goddess' efficiency and diligence in dealing with devotees' problems. It opens a space and time in which men and deity get physically close to take their relationship to a more intimate and palpable level. I was told that seeing the goddess reactualize her fight in a most realistic and vigorous way during Muṭiyēttu allows her devotees to sense her might in their flesh and deepens their trust in her potential for action. By being able to support her with their physical presence on her side and their boosting shouts, they have the feeling that they contribute a tiny bit to her cosmic combat and prove to her their interest and personal commitment to her life mission (killing the *asura*) in a most direct way. It is, therefore, not only about deepening their devotion, but also about expanding their personal involvement with her and her actions.

As for the goddess, she is said to be very fond of seeing herself pictured as the mighty warrior displaying all her weapons, with dreadful physical features and holding her enemy's blood dripping head.

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<sup>11</sup> Otherwise they are financed by the temple authorities as part of the regular devotional activities.

Any physical representation of her under these traits is, therefore, particularly efficient in ritual terms. One of the regular rites conducted in her temples is the *kaḷameḷuttupāṭṭu*, a powder drawing picturing her under those specific traits accompanied by songs describing and praising her and narrating her story. The goddess' pleasure is even greater when she can see herself literally reactualizing the combat.<sup>12</sup> This is the purpose of *Muṭiyēttu*. Besides the pleasure of admiring herself, the performance also feeds her with the exact dose of martial violence and impurity she is said to crave. Bhadrakāḷi was born from the dreadful fire in Śiva's third eye. She is a concentrate of anger and violence, created for the sole purpose of conducting warfare and killing the ones responsible for chaos. Her unique desire is to fulfil this mission and to be loved for it. The best way of serving her worship is then to display that exact same violence in front of her eyes, in order to give her the feeling of accomplishing this task and displaying her beastly capacities again and again. This is where the artistic elements of *Muṭiyēttu* assume the lead role.

### **The theatrical creation of violence**

The myth of *Dārikavadham* and by extension the performance of *Muṭiyēttu* are loaded with the martial and sacrificial themes pertaining

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<sup>12</sup> There is no contradiction in saying that the goddess attends performances as a spectator while also participating in them through the body of the main performer. She is considered as multiplex, simultaneously omnipresent/encompassing and localised/particularised (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2016). Her body and powers are fluid, they can manifest in various ways, fill several sites as well as animate and inanimate objects at the same time, they can be fractionated and moved between receptacles and removed from them (she may also do this on her own) (see the articles in Padoux 1990; Freeman 1991 and 1999; Tarabout 2004). An illustration of this conceptualisation in the context of *Muṭiyēttu* is the fact that she is said to simultaneously possess the *muṭiyēttukar* wearing her attire, be present in the flame of the oil lamps standing in the green-room and at the centre of the performance space, and sit in the holy chamber, the doors of which are kept open throughout the performance.

to the cult of the goddess in this region.<sup>13</sup> The myth weaves a web dominated by sacrificial violence<sup>14</sup> and is thus part of the group of mythical stories (such as the *Bhagavadgītā*) constructed on the “glorification of dharmic violence” (Biardeau 1976: 152) to restore cosmic order. In *Muṭiyēttu*, which focuses on the most violent episodes of the myth, sacrificial violence is constructed in a linear and uninterrupted progression via a mimetic representation of the acts of mutilating and killing, spontaneous and choreographed weapon fights, ruthless and provocative dialogues and a musical accompaniment that simultaneously produce and translate the aggressiveness of the protagonists and the brutality of their interactions.

For the music, during the solo sequences of Bhadrakālī and Dārikan and the entire final combat, the powerful beats of the *ceṇṭas*<sup>15</sup> associated with the striking of the *ilattāḷam*<sup>16</sup> produce a nearly continuous, saturated and acoustically aggressive sonic mass. The percussions can also be reinforced by a *kurumkūlal*<sup>17</sup> and up to two *kompū*<sup>18</sup> enhancing the sonic fierceness with their piercing sound. According to performers, this instrumental accompaniment not only translates acoustically the roughness of combat but it also kindles the characters’ aggressiveness and infuses them with the belligerent energy—a violent

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<sup>13</sup> Kerala is a state the history of which is replete with military ideology touching all levels of the society, especially its mid-section dominated by the *nāyar* caste. These traditional specialists of warfare and martial activities grandly shape the Hindu practices in upper caste temples today.

<sup>14</sup> Tarabout wrote that practices of popular Hinduism as conducted in Kerala today do not have a direct connection with the sacrifice as per the Vedic understanding, in which the rite culminates in the destruction of an offering or victim. Here, “the foundation of worship is [...] the puja, which is more adoration rite than sacrifice” (Tarabout 1986: 554).

<sup>15</sup> A large high pitch cylindrical drum played vertically with two long thin sticks.

<sup>16</sup> A pair of small brass cymbals.

<sup>17</sup> A small wooden oboe.

<sup>18</sup> A C-shaped horn made of brass or copper.

“breath of life” as they say—to reactualize the cosmic battle in a most realistic way. In the Malayali context, instruments that create sonic violence such as the *ceṅṅa* and *ilattālam* are categorized as *asura vādyam* (‘asuric instruments’),<sup>19</sup> a classification that relies on their *svabhāvam* (‘inherent nature’). According to a temple musician, they produce a terrifying and vibrating sound equivalent to thunder and have a *ghōra śabda* (‘terrible sound/voice’) resembling ‘the voice of the *asuras*’. They are *yuddha vādyas* (‘warrior instruments’) with ‘a strong *śakti*’ able to evoke and (re)produce the violence of war.

In *Muṭiyēttu*, violence is also verbally constructed, the most obvious part being the verbal abuse contained in the dialogue preceding the final killing of the *asuras*. There, the goddess, the general of her army, Dārikan and his twin brother defy and challenge each other, exchanging threats and insults and describing planned acts of mutilation. The evocation of torture that supplements the construction of the performance’s terrifying climax, as well as the insults that express and feed martial violence altogether culminate in the final sacrifice of the *asuras* through beheading.

The third medium for violence construction is the characters’ ‘acting’. When Bhadrakālī enters the field, she stares at an invisible opponent shaking her sword, then runs towards him whirling her blade before sticking it into her invisible enemy. She mimes how she catches her opponent’s neck, chops off the head with her sword and throws it away, then wipes the blood from her blade onto the tongue of an evil attendant. She acts as if juggling with severed heads, spinning them on her index finger before snatching them away as if it were mere insects. In the *Muṭiyēttu* of one family, Bhadrakālī holds a garland of red tassels between her teeth miming how she tears out and devours Dārikan’s bowels. The final battle sequence concentrates most

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<sup>19</sup> They are opposed to the *dēva vādyams* (‘divine instruments’). Guillebaud showed that, in Kerala, this distinction “builds a hierarchy of both the sonic properties of the instruments” and “the uses depending on the context [...] and the social status of their users” (Guillebaud 2003: 352).

of the violence created by scenic actions. All along, assistants carry long torches into which they throw handfuls of a highly inflammable powder to create large fire outbursts. The *muṭiyēttukars* explain that this fire materializes and literally fuels the anger that fills the protagonists during battle. The vivid colored costumes as well as the terror-inspiring make-up and facial accessories, such as the metal fangs protruding at the corners of the goddess' mouth, also play their part in creating visual violence.



Fig. 3: Liminal scene after the head gear has been removed (with the evil spirit Kūḷi)

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For the *muṭiyēttukars*, this combination of theatrical components, simultaneously illustrating and creating the level of violence pertaining to the highly ferocious portion of the reactualized myth, has a transformative power of tremendous importance to the performance's ritual impact. *Muṭiyēttu*' enacts a *yuddham* ('war') in such a way that the performance and the space on which it unfolds respectively turn into the actual *yuddham* and *yuddhabhūmi* ('land of war', 'battlefield') of the myth. In the same vein, *Muṭiyēttu*' enacts a *vadham* ('murder', 'carnage') at the heart of the *yuddham* in a way as to merge the actual massacre of the *asura* with its theatrical imitation. The enactment becomes the enacted, just as the artistic representation of the deity becomes her ontological body. Discussions with

performers and temple officiants as well as observation of the logistic arrangements and ritualistic precautions and countermeasures that are part of every *Muṭiyēttu*' today clearly indicate that acted and mimed bloodshed and violence are endowed with the same capacity to generate dangerous powers, engender impurity and attract evil spirits as real bloodshed and violence. The scope of this view is not just dialogic. Performers explained that *Muṭiyēttu*' has to be conducted in the dead of the night for this reason, to protect the weak and the immature beings who cannot withstand such terror and are supposed to be safe sleeping in their beds when the performance unfolds. It is also in order to hold the performance during Bhadrakālī's *yāmam*, the period stretching from 9 pm to 3 am which is devoted to her. Informants told me that the night, especially the period around midnight, is the period when Bhadrakālī walks in and around her temple and can be seen by selected individuals. Everything done at that time goes most directly to her and is set under her protection. Since the performance generates a high concentration of violence and impurity that appeal to a wide range of lower beings, it is safer to schedule it at a time when Bhadrakālī, who controls these dangerous powers that notably compose her army, is the leading deity. The attraction of harmful beings is no simple idea of the mind either. It is ritually counteracted by substitutes of blood and animal sacrifices conducted after every single *Muṭiyēttu*' to quench the blood thirst and send off the evil beings who infest the temple surroundings after the performance. To end with, the temple is temporarily closed after every performance in order to be cleaned from the residual impurity generated by the reactualised act of killing. A *muṭiyēttukar* explained that "Dārikan's body lies there and *bhūtas* come to eat it", so no human should enter the divine abode then. Most temples I visited reduce this restriction to a few hours during which the compound is swept, the litter picked up and a brief *punyāham* (purification rite) performed. In one temple, the sanctums of Bhadrakālī and secondary deities are closed for seven days following the performance because of the pollution generated by *Muṭiyēttu*'. One last ritual consequence of the violence and pollution deriving from performances is the distance

that needs to be kept between the performance area, the central building of the temple and the other deities in order to protect them from the generated impurity. These measures underscore the ritual substance of the violence and pollution created during *Muṭiyēttu*, and thus serve as evidence of the materializing power of its theatrical components.

Now, why is the ritual reality of the artistic construction of violence of such great importance to the role played by *Muṭiyēttu* in the cult of the goddess? As developed elsewhere (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2016 and 2017), incarnations of Bhadrakālī vary from temple to temple, hence differences in how she is to be served and pleased. She can be in four different *bhāvas* (behavioural dispositions)<sup>20</sup> depending on which episode of the myth she is ‘stuck’ in. The *bhāva* of an incarnate form of the goddess is a relatively constant, inherent and official attribute. It not only qualifies her mental representation by devotees, but also nurtures the liturgy and in some respects plays a role in the selection of rites, offerings and ritual performing arts conducted in each temple. When Bhadrakālī is incarnated in the *raudra* (‘furious’, ‘violent’) *bhāva*, as she is in a majority of her shrines, she is the personification of focused martial power crystallising her condition when searching for and fighting against the *asura* Dārikan. It is exclusively for this type of goddess that *Muṭiyēttu* ‘works’. There are four reasons for that. First, it re-enacts the exact portions of the myth in which she is ‘stuck’ and thus gives her to see, hear, do and feel what she mostly craves in that particular condition: war, killing enemies and the recognition of her martial feats. Second, it re-enacts the corresponding mythical sequence in a way that translates all of Bhadrakālī’s fundamental characteristics and interests in the *raudra bhāva*. The performative and theatrical components construct a coherent and powerful nexus embedding the anger and fire that are at the source of her creation, the violence and bloodshed that are the heart of her life mission. Seeing the performance and being able to partake in it via the body of the senior *muṭiyēttukar* is a pleasurable experience for her—*Muṭiyēttu*

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<sup>20</sup> A term used by Freeman (Freeman 1991: 358).

is a *dēvikāmāya kalā* (‘art for the pleasure of the goddess’)—which is an indispensable prerequisite for bypassing her anger, channelling her dangerous powers and putting them at the service of human needs. Third, it displays and generates the exact same level of violence that fills her being in that specific condition. She can recognise herself in it and blend into it in order to relive and reactualize her cosmic battle. Informants kept telling me that this type of goddess particularly enjoys seeing herself accomplishing the bloody act that justified her creation and gained her the respect of gods as well as the right to be worshipped on earth. Giving her the opportunity to endlessly re-experience this act is considered as the most effective way of pleasing her, appeasing her inherent anger and ensuring her protection. Fourth and finally, *Muṭiyēttu*’ helps achieving the target of worship for a *raudra* Bhadrakālī because its overtly theatrical and appealing setting attracts attention and stays in the minds of those who attend it. It thereby contributes to spreading among men and fixing in their minds the part of the myth that is definitional for her, as well as the knowledge of her tremendous and potentially destructive powers. It helps her be recognised, worshipped and respected for what she really is, not only by the largest possible amount of humans but also by the many beings who sit in the hidden to witness her deeds.

### **Conclusion: about liminality and gaps**

In all the ways described above, theatre, ritual, and the culmination of their very essence in possession that epitomizes the liminality between the two spheres, work synergistically to make the goddess present and reactualize her cosmic combat in order to feed Bhadrakālī’s pleasure and nurture her worshippers’ devotion. The blurring of the two realms and fusing of their characteristics pervade the whole of the performance. But this intricate web shows gaps that pinpoint the difficulty, and to some extent the meaninglessness, of drawing a line between the realms of theatre and ritual using our neat western concepts and framed conceptualizations for analyzing performative and artistic events in this type of setting. These gaps correspond to moments

during which one part of the paradigm, i.e. theatre, appears to take over the other, ritual, as for instance during the liminal scene that follows the abrupt removal of the headgear where the *muṭiyēttukar* is forcefully controlled and his sword taken off his hands. This act is meant to stop the embodiment process at the turning point during which the controlled and fixed staging of possession may slip into an unpredictable display of untamed possession, and the imitation of the act of killing transform into a real killing.<sup>21</sup> The *muṭiyēttukar* is finally seated on a stool to rest. The knots of his upper garment are untied and cool water is poured onto his naked back and shoulders. He is given tender coconut juice to drink. Right then, he is nothing more than an exhausted human wearing a now dirty costume and damaged make up.<sup>22</sup> And yet this is the moment when some devotees come to stand at a little distance from the exhausted and obviously back to human performer, with the same attitude as when the doors of the deity's *sanctum* are opened for *darśan*: gathered close together, some of them hands in prayer, observing the scene from behind over a head or a shoulder, often standing in two groups on both sides of an imaginary corridor starting from the *muṭiyēttukar*—as if the power still emanating from him made it too dangerous to stand directly in front of him, just like it is said that humans cannot withhold the deity's gaze from a frontal position (Daniel 1984). The headgear is off the head, the drums stopped creating the martial sonic backdrop of the battle, the theatricalization has come to a halt. The main markers and vectors of possession have thus been 'shut down'. The *muṭiyēttukar* is obviously no more the goddess. Nevertheless, this is the moment when

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<sup>21</sup> I came across sixteen temples or sites near temples in which informants claimed to have witnessed or heard of such a real act of killing happening in the course of a performance. In ten of them the tradition of *Muṭiyēttu* was permanently discontinued thereafter. And in two, the identified 'crime site' is named in reference to the alleged bloody act. See Pasty 2010: chap. 3.

<sup>22</sup> By then, parts of the dried lime spikes on his face have usually broken away due to heavy sweating and the swaying of the headgear.

the devotees, who were joyfully jumping around the character they believed to be the goddess in the flesh, take a devotional, awe inspired and recollecting stance. In the same vein, after a short break, the head-gear is put back onto the performer's head for the final sequence ending with the *asuranj*' beheading. This sequence is heavily marked by tiredness, slow movements and passive interactions even though the uttered words still display a high level of aggressiveness. Yet it is at the end of this sequence, in which the men and their weakness show far more than the mythical characters and gods they impersonate, that the devotees gather in front of the personified goddess with their children to receive the much awaited blessing from her divine hands. The recognised presence of the goddess in the body of the *mutiyēttukar* is a prerequisite for the powerfulness of this sequence. I have not heard a devotee voice the slightest doubt about the reality of possession at this precise moment, even though it was the most literal 'play' of possession that was obviously dominating a few seconds earlier.

So even when the ritual is technically speaking no more active, when the performer no longer makes any effort to make devotees believe in his body's transformation into the deity's ontological body, when the vivid reactualization of the goddess' myth gives way to a weak staging carried out by passive men, and likewise when the theatrical and performative elements no longer achieve the materializing target of imitation, even then, the devotees' body language still translates their belief in the enduring and palpable presence of the deity. Ritual continues to operate beyond its technical apparatus. The blanks left by the interruption of human actions creating ritual are then filled by the codified devotional substructure of the performance, which is known and shared by all the men and women involved in it, be it from the side of the audience, the sponsors or the performers, or from the side of the temple officiants, who are in charge of periphery rites to prepare the ritual setting for the performance and counteract the ritual creation of violence and pollution once it is over. The pivotal roles in this substructure are then played by the conceptualization of the goddess as an omnipresent, fluid and pervasive agent, capable of

will and action on one side (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2016), and the commonly shared expectation of how she is to be given a body to interact with her people in particular contexts, such as *Muṭiyēttu*, on the other.<sup>23</sup> The performance is not over until the blessings have been distributed. And it is the goddess who takes over this act. This is how things are expected and supposed to be, and so this is how they are. The goddess is there no matter how much and how qualitative a human intervention is added to display this intervention of hers.

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<sup>23</sup> The importance of the expectation of the audience (here about the conventions constructing the performance and the mechanics of possession) for determining the efficacy and quality of a performance was raised by various authors, such as Schieffelin 1985; Flueckiger 1988 or de Bruin 2004.

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