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Dancing the Ritual on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam Theatre Stage*

SUMMARY: Until the 1960s, Kūṭiyāṭṭam**—India’s Sanskrit theatre—was exclusively performed in Hindu temples of Kerala by an ensemble of three ritual performers of high status: the Cākyār actor-master, the Nampyār percussionist, and the Nañnyār reciter, cymbalist and actress. Within this devotional context, Kūṭiyāṭṭam, whose essence is theatre (*nāṭya*), is considered an offering of ‘dance’ (*nr̥tta*) to the main divinity. Furthermore, the performative cycles, lasting from three to forty-one days, incorporate dances known as ‘*kriya*’, literally ‘what has to be done’ or ‘action’, designating the ritual action here. This paper attempts to complement previous studies based on the Indian theory of theatre, by questioning the uses and roles of dance in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatrical sphere and tackling the issue of boundaries between dance and dramatic action. The study draws on long-range anthropological research as well as on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam literature, especially the Cākyār’s acting and production manuals (*āṭṭaparakāram* and *kramadīpikā*) written in Malayalam, three of which are composed

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** The terms Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Kūṭtu, with capital letters, without italics, are proper names (theatre genres) as well as the names of specific performances: Aṅgulīyāṅkam Kūṭtu, Mantrāṅkam Kūṭtu, etc. The terms ‘*kūṭtu*’ and ‘*kūṭiyāṭṭam*’ are in italics, without capital letters (*kūṭtu*, *kūṭiyāṭṭam*), when they are used as common-names in sentences. Kerala contemporary place names are not transliterated with diacritics.

for the performance of the following Sanskrit plays: *Bālacaritam* and *Abhiṣekanāṭakam* of Bhāsa, and *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi* of Śaktibhadra.

KEYWORDS: Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Sanskrit theatre, Hinduism, dance, ritual, performative literature in Malayalam.

This paper focuses on ritual dances of the only living practice of ancient Sanskrit dramatic literature: the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre of Kerala. A Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance is based on a single act of an ancient Sanskrit play, into which narratives are interwoven. The performances of the *Rāmāyaṇa* plays, which I focus on, respond to the following basic structure. On the first day, the main character of the act-play appears on stage (*purapāṭṭu*) for the first time, to introduce himself and disclose the initial dramatic situation. On the second as well as on the following days, the actor becomes a story-teller to perform a so-called retrospection (*nirvahaṇam*): using gestures drawn from an acting manual in Malayalam (the language of Kerala), he narrates a story that sets the background for the initial situation. The dramatic act that was disclosed on the first day and placed in its historical and mythological context during the retrospection is then enacted through the Kūṭiyāṭṭam *per se* conducted on the final night(s) by several actor-characters, who then literally ‘play together’ (*kūṭi-āṭṭam*).¹ Some performing cycles respond to a double structure, as is the case for Bālivadhā, i.e. the Act of Bāli’s Death—based on act I of the *Abhiṣekanāṭakam* [*Abhiṣ*] attributed to Bhāsa (5th century A.D.?)—that lasts for five days.² Others, such as the Aṅgulīyāṅkam Kūṭtu, i.e. the Act of the Ring—based on act VI of the *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi* [*Āśc*] of Śaktibhadra (11th century A.D.?)—that lasts for twelve days, display a far more complex structure.³

¹ On this basic structure, see Moser 2000. About the epic and dramatic sources of the retrospections, see Johan 2014; 2018.

² The first set composed of the *purapāṭṭu* and *nirvahaṇam* is followed by a second one performed prior to the *kūṭiyāṭṭam* of the dramatic act (Johan 2014).

³ About the Aṅgulīyāṅkam Kūṭtu, masterpiece of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire, see Johan 2014; forthcoming, and Shulman 2016.

The roles taken over by the performer during each performing cycle are multiple: the actor is a character on the first and the last days, a storyteller in the retrospection, and stage-manager directing the mentioned functions throughout the entire performance.⁴ He is also a dancer at the beginning of the cycles as well as (but rarely) in some parts of the drama. In this last role, the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performer so to say ‘dances the ritual’: dances are called *kriyas*, which literally means ‘action’, which is firstly, in India and in the terminology of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performers, the ritual action. Dance is thereby endowed with a ritual role and power that I will try to qualify.

For which reason, at what moment and based on which modalities are the dances interwoven into the performance? How far do dancing processes differ from acting techniques and what are the signs that distinguish the ritualistic and acting spheres? Is dance linked to the dramatic plot? These are the questions this paper will attempt to answer with a view to complementing the studies tackling the role of dance in the Indian theatre from the perspective of the Sanskrit theatre treatise *Nāṭyaśāstra* and its commentary by Abhinavagupta (Bansat-Boudon 2004; Ganser 2013). It will underscore the ritual aspects of dance and its aesthetic resonance in the specific Kerala praxis of the ancient Sanskrit theatre that is Kūṭiyāṭṭam. In terms of methodology, the study results from a multidisciplinary approach to Kūṭiyāṭṭam, drawing firstly on fifteen years of anthropological research in the field of Kūṭiyāṭṭam teaching and performance in central Kerala, and secondly on the practitioners’ acting manuals (*āṭṭaparakāram*) and production manuals (*kramadīpikā*) composed in Malayalam.⁵

⁴ This last role is highlighted by the conventional key-gestures thanks to which, for example, each function is separated from the other. Examples will be given below.

⁵ The Cākyārs wrote two types of manuals for each act-play of their repertoire: 1) a production manual that notably defines the general structure of the performance; 2) an acting manual that provides information about the texts to perform and the acting techniques (Johan 2014, vol. 2: 534–541).

An anonymous Sanskrit commentary on Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the *Naṭāṅkuśa* (16th century A.D.?), will also provide us with some clues. Structurally, the article proceeds in four parts: it starts with a brief ethnography of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam masters (1), followed by some terminological remarks (2) and a description of the main ritual dances (3), which then lead us to discuss the links between dance and the dramatic action (4), and finally delineate the ritual role of dance in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatrical sphere.

1. Kūttu and the Cākyār ‘dancers’—anthropological context

Today, Kūṭiyāṭṭam is performed outside of the precincts of temples of Kerala by Kerala artists who belong to different castes. However, for centuries, until the 1960s, this art was exclusively performed in the largest Hindu temples of Kerala by a group of three ritual performers of high status from the upper temple-servants cast: the Cākyār actors, the Nampyār drummers and the Nañnyār reciters, cymbalists and actresses (fig. 1). Members of these three subcastes are to this day the only ones allowed to perform Kūṭiyāṭṭam in temples, especially in the unique temple-theatres (*kūttampalam*), to which their art has been confined for centuries (fig. 2).⁶ The Cākyārs, on whom my studies mainly focus on,⁷ share family rights that attach them to several temples and endow them with the responsibility of offering theatre to the main divinities.⁸ They used to follow a matrilineal kinship system—enriched with an avuncular transmission of

⁶ About these ancient theatres, built in the Hindu temples of Kerala, notably see Rajagopalan 2000; Chakyar 2015. A few *kūttampalam*s of Southern Kerala in which Kūṭiyāṭṭam had not been performed for a long time recently opened their stages to all Kūṭiyāṭṭam artists (like Kapila Venu, whose dream was to perform such wonderful art on such wonderful stages). However, until now, caste distinctions continue to be strictly applied in the temples of central and northern Kerala.

⁷ About the actresses’ practice and the Nampyārs/Nañnyārs’ families, see Moser’s thesis and Daugherty’s papers (full references are given in Moser’s *Bibliography of Kūṭiyāṭṭam*—Moser 2011).

⁸ About the hereditary rights and the history of the agrarian society elaborated by the Kerala Brahmins (Nampūtiri) around the temples, see Veluthat 2009.

theatre—which was, in olden times, complementary to the patrilineal system of the Naṃpūtiri Brahmins.⁹ Nowadays, the Cākyārs who are trained in Kūṭiyāṭṭam (roughly one in four) also perform outside of the devotional setting. Furthermore, almost all of them (totally a dozen) still consider as a main duty to remain in the traditional path by performing in the temples. For example, my master Rāma Cākyār (member of the Painkuḷam family) says: “If I don’t perform in Venganellur [the temple inherited from his maternal grand-uncle], I am not a Cākyār”. According to Hindu logic, performing in the family temple corresponds to the Cākyārs’ hereditary social function, the modalities of which derive from the social status as set by the caste system and the level of purity attained: among the temple-servant subcastes, the Cākyārs are ‘twice-born’, as are the Brahmins, but they cannot touch the god directly as the latter do through worship: they ‘touch’ him indirectly, through theatre.

In the delimited context of the Kerala temples, Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances are generically known as ‘*kūttu*’.¹⁰ The performing cycles follow three modalities recalling the three types of Vedic sacrifice (*yāga/yajña*): regular *kūttu* (*aṭiyantara*, comparable with the *nitya* sacrifice), votive *kūttu* (*valivāṭu*, comparable with *kāmya*), and spectacular *kūttu* (*kālcca*, comparable with *naimittika*). Regular *kūttus* are conducted in some temples once or twice a year for three

⁹ Until the 1960s, the Naṃpūtiri were the fathers of the Cākyārs (see: Johan 2011b; 2014, vol. 1: 55–136). Over the past decade, the Cākyārs’ matrilineal system shifted towards a patrilineal system. Recently both descent systems have cohabited among seven Cākyār families, six among which include actors. My present research focuses on listing and explaining the wedding and descent changes and their consequences on the artistic transmission and the ritual practice.

¹⁰ In older times, many types of dances were referred to using this term translated as ‘play’. In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, *kūttu* usually designates performances that do not include ‘acting together’ (*kūṭiyāṭṭam*), such as Cākyār Kūttu (performed by a single actor) or Naṅṅyār Kūttu (performed by a woman). However, in temples, all Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances are usually called ‘*kūttu*’.

to forty-one days; votive performances are offered by private devotees, often to obtain progeny; spectacular *kūttus* are conducted during temple festivals. Regardless of the type of *kūttu*, performances are usually connected with the main divinity of the temple in terms of space, time and subjects composing the enacted story. The stage is oriented towards the sanctuary so that the god faces the stage and is able to attend and receive the theatrical action in a most direct way. The temple-theatres (*kūttampalam*) are built on the basis of the same type of cosmic diagram as is used for the architectural foundation of the temple—for example, the floor as well as the ceiling of the stage are the seat of the gods of directions (*dikpālaka*), Brahmā being at the center. Therefore, the stage appears as a temple within the temple's temple-theatre. When performing, the actor stands in front of the tall and central oil lamp holding three wicks that were lit with the fire coming from the temple's holy chamber. Some artists compare these three flames with the three sacrificial altars or Agni, the Fire-God, who carries the theatrical offering to the gods—gods who also created theatre, according to the myth opening the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.¹¹ In terms of time, one of the multiple important rules requires the Cākyārs to tie the 'red thread' (the first piece of the costume to be worn) around their forehead before closing the god's chamber in order to establish a connection with the divine abode (fig. 3). Finally, the stories that are enacted

¹¹ See Bansat-Boudon 1992; 2004. About the comparison between Kūṭiyāṭṭam and sacrifice, see late guru Māṇi Mādhava Cākyār's discourse (Bargavinilayam 1999), a Kerala scholar's opinion (Narayanan 2006), and my own analysis (Johan 2014, vol. 1: 218–223). Let me underscore that, although Narayanan criticizes some 'western studies' for overemphasising the ritual aspects of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, these aspects are very important in the context of the temples, and for the artists who perform in this context. They are little known to the foreign researchers who are not officially Hindus and, therefore, are not allowed to enter the *kūttampalam* (only Hindus can enter the big Hindu temples in Kerala: I personally converted to Hinduism in 1999). Finally, there is a lack of new local studies about the ritualistic cycles and aspects of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, for example about the appealing *Act of the Ring* (*Aṅgulīyāṅkam*).

certainly please the gods: for example, at the Triprayar temple, where the Kūttu of the Ring is not conducted in a theatre but directly in front of the holy chamber of Rāma, in the Namaskāra-maṇḍapa, where Brahmins conduct some worships. It is said that Rāma waits for Hanumān (the unique character of the Kūttu) to tell him how he discovered his abducted wife, Sītā, in Rāvana's (the demon's) garden on the Laṅkā Island. The firecrackers offering (*veṭi*) conducted in the temple is said to recall the sound of Hanumān jumping to Laṅkā (fig. 4).

The aforementioned data underscore how far Kūṭiyāṭṭam is part and parcel of the devotional life of temples in the given areas. We will now see how the general ritual role played by this theatre, in this context, is highlighted by the dances that punctuate the performances, starting with two terminological points.

2. Theatre as 'dance' (*ṅṛtta*) and dance as 'rite' (*kriya*)—terminological remarks

On the boards listing the offerings that are posted at the doors of temples, Kūttu is often mentioned as a 'dance', *ṅṛttam*. The devotees can offer a theatrical 'dance' to the god in the same (but more expensive) way as they present him with a garland. This popular/devotional terminology could explain why a respected guru such as late Ammannūr Parameśvaran Cākyār (1916–2008), who never performed Kūṭiyāṭṭam outside temples, referred to his art as 'dance' (*ṅṛttam*), even if he fully agreed that Kūṭiyāṭṭam was theatre, *nāṭya*—a 'total' art incorporating acting technics (*abhinaya*), music (*vādyā*), songs (*gāna*) and dance (*ṅṛtta*), as explained in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (to which he also referred to) and its commentaries.¹² I believe that the late guru might have felt like a 'dancer' for the two following reasons:¹³ first, because he was performing in the temples, where Kūṭiyāṭṭam is assimilated to 'dance'; second, because he was a specialist of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam

¹² Private communication, Irinjalakuda, 2000. About the definition of *nāṭya* in theoretical texts, see Bansat-Boudon 1992: 22, 145–146; Ganser 2013.

¹³ About the Cākyār's 'dancer identity', see Johan 2014, vol. 1: 137–240.

‘rites’ (*kriyas*), which notably correspond to the dance sequences of Kūṭiyāṭṭam (fig. 5).

Orally as well as in their performing manuals, the Cākyārs generally refer to the dance portions using the word *kriya*, which they also use to refer to some other personal rituals. Kūṭiyāṭṭam involves two main ‘*kriyas*’ with generic proper names (see part 3), each of which include dance-sequences with their own proper names. Examples given below will show that the performing manuals sometimes indifferently use the word ‘dance’ (*nṛttam*) for *kriya*, or enumerate the names of the dance-sequences. Most of the time the performers’ texts only allude to the dance, except in the acting manual written for the first public performance (*araṅṅēttam*), known as the ‘Director’s Entering [on stage]’ (Sūtradhāra Purapāṭṭu), in which rituals, and sometimes dance, are described with more details.¹⁴ In any case, the performing manuals never detail the dances. Dance is taught ‘orally’, directly, during the very act of dancing. Let us now see at what moment it appears, how it looks like and according to which ‘text’ it is performed.

3. The two main danced rites: *marayilkriya* and *nityakriya*—formal presentation

Every actor learns to dance in his childhood, sometimes in one or two years, because *kriyas* are the main elements of the ceremony of first entering onstage of the Director (Sūtradhāra), the first performance of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam tradition. Dances open and close the first (*purapāṭṭu*) day of this (and each) performing cycle. After some musical preliminaries (notably a Sanskrit hymn called *akitta*, chanted by the Naṅṅyār sitting on the right side of the stage¹⁵) and an invocation verse (*nāṅṅī* or *araṅṅutali śloka*, which is performed by the Nampyār drummer),

¹⁴ See notes 16 and 17. About this performance and the first role of the Sūtradhāra—a super-Actor role on which I believe the epic aesthetic of Kūṭiyāṭṭam is constructed (*infra*: note 31)—see Johan 2014; 2017.

¹⁵ I place myself as the performers, facing the lamp and the public. From the public’s point of view, it corresponds to the left side of the stage.

the Cākyār performs the *maṛayilkriya*, ‘the rite to be done behind the curtain’, after which he acts as a character (*veṣam*). Finally, he performs the *nityakriya*, ‘the regular rite’ (or ‘the rite to be done daily’, notably because the student must rehearse it every day). The dance training contributes to shaping the actor’s body and creates a rhythmic body, which is essential since each movement is beaten by the *miḷāvu*, the drum of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the Nampyār drum. Let us now have a closer look at the dances.

For the *maṛayilkriya*, the actor (dressed as a character) enters onstage via the left door. Hidden by the curtain (held by two assistants), he faces the drum, back turned to the curtain and to the public, and performs the salutation ‘dedicated to the music’ (*abhivādyam*—fig. 6) as well as several pure dance sequences of the *nṛttam* type. Here, steps and gestures do not have any discursive signification—this apparent lack of meaning being a general property of ritual.¹⁶

¹⁶ “Rituals do not tell stories; they enact particular realities”, in the words of the anthropologist and ritual specialist Houseman (Houseman 2006: 414). The Kūṭiyāṭṭam dance-rites are described in the following terms in the acting manual of the Sūtradhāra Purappāṭu [Ms. Araṅṅēttam Āṭṭaparakāram]: “After the consecration of the stage, when the curtain is held [...], the actor does his ablutions, dances behind the curtain, does the ‘node gesture’ and his face ablutions, takes flowers in his hands, makes the turning steps, and stands in front of the lamp, in a happy mood” (*araṅṅutaḷiccu yavanika piṭticcu [...] sūtradhāran maṛayil mutal naṭayāṭi muṭticcu mukhattunīrtaliḷiccu pūvvu kayyil piṭticcu kaḷiyam vaccutiriṅṅū viḷakkattu tānnu ninnu prasanna bhāvaṃ*). The dance-sequences which are here performed pertain to the *nṛttam* category that stems from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in which special dance-gestures are devoid of discursive meaning (see Ganser 2013). In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the same twenty-four *mudrās*, drawn from the Cākyār’s Sanskrit manual for hand-gestures (*Hastalakṣaṇadīpikā*), are used for acting as well as for dancing. But when acting, the hand movements illustrate words and ideas, whereas when dancing, they abstractly structure the sound-space. And yet they are never entirely meaningless, because the ritual action carries an “extra-ordinary significance” responding to its own rules and references (Houseman 2006). About the rituals’ “autonomy”, “autopoietic qualities of self-organization”, and complexities, see also Handelman 2004.

The *nityakriya* lasts longer and closes the first day. The acting manual of the Sūtradhāra Purapāṭṭu reads:

After having touched the earrings [conventional separating gesture], do the [gesture called] *dhruva*, ‘the short’ and ‘the long’ [dance], etc., perform all the danced-rite (*kriya*), ending with the [last] dance (*nṛttam*) [which consists in a salutation to Brahmā], and prostrate.¹⁷

Even if it is not mentioned as such, the *nityakriya* (here named ‘*kriya*’) consists of two types of dances, some of which are accompanied with Sanskrit songs uttered by the woman reciter. They correspond to: on the one hand, pure dance (*nṛttam*), without narrative signification, and, on the other hand, mimetic dance (*nṛtyam*), with steps indexed on the rhythm and gestures drawn from an oral narrative subtext in Malayalam providing discursive information.¹⁸

Both types of dances are distinguished from acting (*abhinaya*), not only because they include given rhythmic steps, but also and primarily because the actor does not depict theatrical emotions: in the words of Rāma Cākyār, the actor-dancer must “smile gently” only “to show that he is pleased to dance”.¹⁹ The master’s words refer to the same fundamentals as prescribed in the Sanskrit theoretical texts on theatre, according to which “dance is described in negative terms as devoid of this fundamental feature of theatre”, and should “charm” the public (Ganser 2013: 180–181, 186–189).

Let’s note that the performer certainly deserves credit for smiling since dance implies great physical and mental efforts. The apparent simplicity of the choreographies (that I cannot describe in detail in this short paper) masks the fact that each movement call upon every muscle

¹⁷ *kuṇḍalamittu muṭiccu dhruvakāṭṭi ceriyakku valiyakku ādiyāyi kriya okkayum āṭi nṛttattil muṭiccu dīrgha namaskāraṃ ceytu* [Ms. op. cit.]. This text will be progressively explained.

¹⁸ An example of *nṛtya* subtext will be given below. The term ‘*nṛtya*’ is absent from the manuals, but it is sometimes mentioned orally in the training context, and is known and accepted by the performers

¹⁹ Private communication, Cheruthuruthi, 2002.

of the body. Furthermore, dance also requires deep concentration in order to perform each sequence correctly and link the parts with each other without making mistakes—since the *kriyas* are rites, no one is supposed to make mistakes in performing them.²⁰ To memorize the steps, the student uses fixed mnemonic syllables (*vāytāri*, ‘mouth-rhythm’) based on a system widely used for the Indian transmission of music and dance, especially in Kerala.²¹ It is only during the stage performance that the actor performs with drums that transform both the oral/mental rhythmic syllables into percussive beats and the kinetic acting-sphere into sound-space.

The technical difficulty of dance for example clearly appears in the *nṛtya*-sequence known as “Homage to the guardians of the directions” (*Dikpālaka vandanam*) executed at the end of the *nityakriya*. The sequence superimposes three types of text: 1) a devotional Sanskrit text chanted by the Nañnyār woman sitting on the right side of the stage; 2) a hand-gesture text in Malayalam through which the actor invokes the eight Guardians of the cardinal points; 3) a rhythmic/syllabic text (and drum beats onstage) that guides the steps. Although none of the texts should be written down, the students do so nowadays, at least for the gestures’ subtext, which here signifies: “plucking flowers, I salute Indra [and then, each god respectively] by dancing” (fig. 7).²² Turned to the appropriate direction (the East, for Indra), the actor-dancer respectively salutes: Agni (South-East), Yama (South), Nirṛiti (South-West), Varuṇa (West), Vāyu (North-West), Vaiśravaṇa (North) and Śiva (North-East). While performing the gestures, he walks

²⁰ Moser also mentions this important point (Moser 2012). In this accuracy lies what Houseman calls “the quality of the [ritual] action” (Houseman 2006: 413). Please note that, in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, there is no improvisation at all in dance, which is not the case for all ‘rituals’ (*ibid.*).

²¹ About the musical transmission in Kerala, see Guillebaud 2008. The syllables of the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam kriyas* are recorded in my Ph.D. (Johan 2014, vol. 1: 385–386).

²² *Indrādi dēvanmār [...] pūvaruttuṣṣu iṭṭuṣṣu nṛttam ceytuṣṣu vandikkunnu* (personal notes).

back and forth in each direction using steps following the proper rhythm (*titita titita, takatakata takatakata...*). To end with, the actor faces the lamp and salutes Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Bhagavatī, etc. All along the dance, the Nañnyār chants an independent Sanskrit hymn dedicated to the Hindu Gods.

In the last sequence titled “Heaven, Earth, Hell” (*svarga, bhūmi, pātālam*), the actor salutes all the creatures living in the three Hindu worlds, the last one being Brahmā. The closing sequence (of the *nṛttam* type) consists in offering flowers to Brahmā, who sits in the center of the stage, spinning round again and again, and prostrating. This sequence is usually mentioned as ‘knotting/finishing the Kūttu’ (*kūttu mūṭippu*).²³

In both sequences, and more generally in any forms it appears in a Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance, dance acts out and establishes a strong connection between the performer and the cosmic background (made of non-human entities): the actor ‘invokes the gods by dancing’, thus making them present onstage. This ritual property and power of dance is confirmed by the roles of the *kriyas* within the performances.

4. Dancing the ritual: prior to and within the fiction—dramatic analysis

Before entering onstage, the performer stands at the door of the green-room doing facial ablutions (fig. 8). According to Rāma Cākyār, these ablutions may constitute the fifth of the ‘five baths’ (*pañcasnānam*) the Cākyārs perform every day. The performer enters onstage with his ablution vase (*kiṇḍi*), places it at the feet of the drum, salutes the drum,

²³ The sequence also includes a so-called ‘node gesture’ that evokes a prescription of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* according to which the first mythical performance was ‘tied’, *baddha* (Bansat-Boudon 2012: 215–216). This gesture reappears in the *kriyas* conducted in the framework of the drama. Please note that two edited and subtitled original short films accompanied the two above described sequences during the two lectures that preceded this article, both in June 2014 (firstly at the Coffe Break Conference that was held at the University La Sapienza in Rome, secondly at the French CNRS Seminar “La danse comme objet anthropologique”, directed by Houseman).

dances behind the curtain, and washes his face again.²⁴ The ablutions thus anchor the danced rite in the daily ritual life of the Cākyārs, who are orthodox Hindus (fig. 9), and the *kiṇḍi*, as an instrument of the religious life, could be seen as a material link between the socio-ritual time and the performance time.

At a structural level, the *kriyas* establish a transition between the social time and the dramatic time of theatre. The danced rite performed ‘behind the curtain’ (*maṛarayilkriya*) connects the actor to the performative and rhythmic world, while the final danced rite (*nityakriya*) separates the dramatic time from the social time by recreating a transition in the reverse order. Both dances seem to be a sort of ritual parenthesis framing the dramatic action.²⁵ Due to these liminal ‘parentheses’, the whole ‘starting’ day (*puṛapāṭṭu*), including its fictional mid-part, can be apprehended as the preliminaries of a performing cycle. This hypothesis relies on the comparison between the twenty-three steps of the Sūtradhāra Puṛapāṭṭu and the nineteen steps of the preliminaries (*pūrvaraṅga*) of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which also include some acting portions.²⁶ Viewed through these lenses, the danced rites appear as the rite par excellence of the *puṛapāṭṭu*-*pūrvaraṅga* of a performance that is in fact also ‘globally’ ritual, thanks to these very preliminaries, and not only with reference to its devotional aim and context.

Thus, dancing corresponds to the ritualistic act of the actor-dancer (*naṭan*), not that of the character (*veṣam*). This distinction is

²⁴ A variation is found in the Kūttu of the Ring (*infra*: note 36).

²⁵ Let us remind ourselves that, after having performed the *maṛarayilkriya*, the actor turns, faces the public, becomes the character, performs a Malayalam ‘acting’ subtext (*āṭṭam*) that presents the character’s situation, and chants the character’s first lines. The actor then finally dances again (*nityakriya*).

²⁶ See Rajagopalan 2000; Johan 2014, vol. 3: annex. I: 10–16. The Sūtradhāra Puṛapāṭṭu is considered as the *pūrvaraṅga* of Kūṭiyāṭṭam and the model of the other *puṛapāṭṭu* related to other performance cycles. Its comparison with the preliminaries of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* notably leads to reconsider the famous Indological “*nāndī* problem” (Bansat-Boudon 2001), a subject I deal with in my Ph.D., and which will be the subject of another article.

underscored by the conventional key gestures consisting in ‘turning’ and ‘touching the earrings’ to separate the two functions: the actor does the ‘turning footsteps’ after the dance behind the curtain, and he ‘touches his earrings’ before entering for the final dance (*supra*: notes 16–17).

Nevertheless, and this is one of the ambiguous issues of the ever slightly mysterious aesthetic of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the danced rites are not always disconnected from the fictional universe and from the character who will be enacted by the actor. Indeed, we find certain variations in the *kriyas* depending on the roles.²⁷ This point, which opens a new path of research, invites us to question the latest general aspect of dance that fuelled interesting discussions in the theoretical field of Indian theatre: “the irruption of dance into the sphere of the theatrical representation and its aesthetic result” (Ganser 2013: 176). To extend this reflection to the level of theatrical practice, I will now consider the execution of dance as part of the enactment of the dramatic action itself.

Whereas dancing as part of the drama is inherent to the protocol of the Kerala Kathakali dance-theatre genre, where danced sequences (*kalaśam*) enhance the dramatic emotions of enacted parts (*padam*), it is a rare phenomenon in Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* repertoire of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, which is composed of five acts (Johan 2011a), dance is integrated only into the dramatic actions of the two act-plays that were mentioned in the Introduction of this paper: once in the Act of Bali’s Death (Bālivadhama), twice in the Act of the Ring (Aṅgulīyāṅkam). What is the reason for integrating dance here?

²⁷ A few characters, such as the monkey Hanumān in the Kūṭtu of the Ring, have ‘special *marayilkriyas*’ including specific dance portions. For Hanumān, the dance behind the curtain starts with walking steps related to the dramatic action and pertaining to the so-called *saṅketam* (conventional) category and not to the *kriya* category: Hanumān is already present behind the curtain (fig. 10). Furthermore, the following dances include sequences (such as a so-called ‘*tattu*’) that remind the monkey-character’s nature (*infra*: note 36). This fact underscores special links between the actor and Hanumān in the context of this Kūṭtu which is usually exclusively performed in temples (Johan 2014; 2018).

In the performance of the Act of Bāli's Death (based on *Abhiṣ. I*), the actor dances on the last day as part of the 'acting together' of the act-play. When Tārā tries to prevent her husband (the monkey-king Bāli) from fighting with his brother Sugrīva, Bāli says: "Hearken to my prowess, Tārā!..." (prose line before verse 8), and then boasts about successfully churning the milk-ocean (verse 8). The actor then chants the verse and enacts a mimetic extension (*vistara*), known as 'the churning of life's nectar'.²⁸ The actor dances between the prose line and the verse. The production manual reads:

After saying "Hearken to my prowess, Tārā!", stand up, remove the stool, turn, show the node [gesture], start the *kriyas* with [the steps known as] *raṅtām naṭa*, and close/tie [the *kriya*-sequence] with many dances (*śi-nṛttam*). [Chant verse 8] "Tārā, when, once, I went to the churning of the ocean of nectar", and quickly enact the churning of life's nectar.²⁹

Here, the 'node gesture' distinguishes the function of character from that of dancer. After that, the actor performs several specific pure dances (*nṛttam*) referred to as '*kriyas*'. Finally, he returns to Bāli's role, chants, and enacts the churning of the milk-ocean. What is the reason for him to dance at this point?

²⁸ While Bāli's participation in the famous mythological exploit is not mentioned in Sanskrit literature, it is in the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Kampan (KR. IV, iii, 115; Nagar 2008: 391). The Tamil version of the epic inspired the Kerala poet Śaktibhadra as well as several Cākyār's stories. If it is "Bhāsa" (who would be prior to Kampan) who wrote the *Abhiṣekanāṭaka*, would it be possible that he drew his inspiration from a South-Indian oral version of the myth? In any case, the exploit symbolizes Bāli's strength. Furthermore, for Kampan, it led the monkey to marry Tārā, who was born from the churning of the milk-ocean. Recalling the feat could help Bāli to calm down and reassure his spouse.

²⁹ "tāre śrūyatām matparākramah" enniṭṭu drutattil raṅtāmnaṭa. naṭē pīṭhamnīkki eḷunnēṭṭu tiriññuninnu kuttimuṭiccu tuṭaṅṅūkriya. oṭukkaṃ iśśi nṛttamkoṅṭu muṭippū. [...] "tare! mayā khalu purāmṛta manthane ['pi gatvā' ennatinnu amṛtamathanam kuṛaṅṅonnu āṭi [...]. (Narayana Pisharoti 1993—there is no acting manual for Bāli's role, only a production manual).

According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and its interpretation by Abhinavagupta, dance and theatre are combined but they never mix (Bansat-Boudon 2004). More precisely, dance marks an apogee in the esthetic emotion (*rasa*) and “ensure[s] the cohesion of representation [...] when it comes to passing from one *rasa* to another, or from one acting register to another” (*ibid.*: 170). Rāma Cākyār says something quite similar: in his mind, the actor performs *kriyas* at this moment of Bāli’s action because Bāli is full of heroism (*vīra*): the dance exalts the courage which the monkey wants to prove to his wife before reminding his participation in the churning of the ocean, which crystallises this valour. While dance thereby differs from the acting techniques that convey the fictional information, it is linked to the fiction.³⁰ In my view, dance in fact creates a distance from the dramatic process because it is subject to strict techniques devoid of ‘meaning’ and ‘emotions’: it acts as one of the numerous ‘distancing’ effects that characterize what I call ‘the epic aesthetic’ of Kūṭiyāṭṭam.³¹ The last example will clarify this idea, showing how dance creates a distance with the performance itself.

In the sixth act of the *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*, the monkey Hanumān finds Sītā in Rāvaṇa’s garden and engages in a discussion with her. Onstage, the actor-Hanumān performs alone for twelve days, while the Nañnyār reciter sitting onstage chants Sītā’s Prakrit lines. Strictly speaking, the Kūttu of the Ring does not include any ‘acting together’; instead, the actor regularly leaves Hanumān’s role and the act-play

³⁰ Technically speaking, it is opposed to the ‘extensive’ way of acting, corresponding to the *aṅkura* phase of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Bansat-Boudon 1992: 341–357), through which the actor mimetically enacts various exploits (like the churning of the milk-ocean).

³¹ By this term, I refer to the narrative dramaturgy of Kūṭiyāṭṭam (including change of points of views, stops-in-time, flash-backs), and to the Brechtian “Epic theatre”, in the (only) sense that its aesthetic was characterized by several ‘distancing’ processes (inspired from Asian theatres), for example by a distance between the ‘actor-demonstrator’ and his role, and by story-teller’s techniques (Johan 2014).

to develop narrative retrospections drawn from the Malayalam acting manual.³² Within this complex framework, dance intervenes in the middle and at the end of the Kūttu, before two important scenes.

The first dance is executed on the sixth day dedicated to the salutation (*namaskāram*) of Sītā by Hanumān. When Hanumān enters Rāvaṇa’s garden for the first time, the acting manual reads:

Repeat: “I will enter [the garden]”, walk, enter [the garden], look around, act “wonderful!”, chant and act: “*eṣām*” [“of these (trees)”—*Āśc* VI, verse 4a], touch the earrings, do all the ritual dance (*kriya*), starting by [the so-called] *taṭṭu* of Hanumān [*nṛttam*], tie/close the *kūttu*, do your facial ablutions [in the greenroom], and come back [onstage].³³

The second *kriya* is performed on the last day, when Hanumān tells Sītā how desperate Rāma was when he realised that she had been kidnapped. The manual reads:

Chant “at that time the God [Rāma]”, touch the earrings [separating gesture], perform the full dance (*nṛttam*), starting with “*kuṅkuṇam*” [the first *nṛttam* sequence of the *nityakriya*], go backstage, do your facial ablutions, and come back onstage.³⁴

Then, the actor-Hanumān utters and enacts Rāma’s words (verse 8 of the play).

On both occasions, even if dance is first called ‘*kriya*’ and then ‘*nṛttam*’, the entire *nityakriya* is performed:³⁵ the actor accomplishes

³² See Johan 2014; forthcoming; Shulman 2016.

³³ [Aṅgulīyāṅkam Āṭṭaparakāram:] “*yāvat praviśāmi*” *ennu pinneyuṁ colli kāluveccu* ~ *akattu katannu* ~ *vaṭṭattil nōkki* “*āścaryyam*” *ennukāṭṭi* “*eṣām*” *ennu kayyōṭukūṭe colli kuṇḍalamittu muṭiccu* ~ *hanumānte taṭṭu tuṭaṅṅi kriya muḷuvan āṭi kūttu muṭiccu* ~ *mukhattu nīru* ~ *taḷiccu* ~ *vannu* [...] (Narayana Pisharoti 1988: 258–259). Then, the actor enacts Rāma’s line as if he was Rāma.

³⁴ “*tatas tadānīm sa dēvaḥ*” *ennucolli kuṇḍalamittu muṭiccu* ~ *kuṅkuṇam tuṭaṅṅittu* ~ *nṛttattōḷam kāṭṭikkaliṅṅāl aṇiyarayil pōyi mukhattu nīru* ~ *taḷiccu* ~ *araṅṅattuvannu* [...]. (*ibid.*: 398–399).

³⁵ The masters I questioned had no explanation for these different terminologies. Let us note that, in fact, not only ‘*nṛttam*’ is performed, but also the mimetic dance (*nṛtyam*) portions of the *nityakriya*.

the conventional gesture of symbolically ‘touching the earrings’, through which he abandons the character’s function to move on to the dancer’s function, then dances, leaves the stage, goes to the greenroom, takes a short break, does his ablutions, and comes back onstage.³⁶ Why does the actor dance?

The author (probably a Nampūtiri Brahmin) of the Sanskrit commentary on Kūṭiyāṭṭam titled *Naṭāṅkuśa* asks this question to the actors and receives this enigmatic reply:

If you know the effect, why search for the cause? [...] Shall we ask why heat is the attribute of fire?³⁷

In this view, dance is naturally part and parcel of theatre, so questions about the reasons to perform it in this context are irrelevant. Indeed, without dance, the theatrical representation would not be in the image of a ‘fire-wheel’, as the theoretical texts on Indian theatre mention (Bansat-Boudon 1992, 2004; Ganser 2013). Nevertheless, earlier in the *Naṭāṅkuśa*, the actor also provided another less laconic answer, explaining that the first dance is performed when Hanumān moves from the heroic to the marvelous feeling of entering the garden.³⁸ This idea, that we have found earlier in Bāli’s case, is again present in our

³⁶ The practice consisting in going to the greenroom after the *nityakriya* recalls the *maṛayilkriya* practice which, in this Kūttu, wants the actor to go backstage to do his ablutions after the dance. Indeed, in this Kūttu, the actor-Hanumān enters onstage with *cāri* vigorous footsteps belonging to the dramatic universe, before starting a special type of *maṛayilkriya*. Because this is Hanumān himself who first enters onstage (fig. 10), the actor does not bring the ablution vase. Thus, after the dance behind the curtain, he goes back to the greenroom, where he left the vase, to do his ablutions. He repeats the custom after the *nityakriya* (private communication from Rāma Cākyār, Paris, 2017).

³⁷ [*Naṭāṅkuśa* II, ii] *yad uktam kāryam ced avagamyeta kiṃ kāraṇaparīkṣayā [...] anyathā agneḥ auṣṇyasya kiṃ nimittam iti pratipraśnaḥ prasajyeta* (Paulose 1993: 14–15).

³⁸ [*Naṭāṅkuśa* I, ii]. *tatra tu āścaryād iti.*—“Here, this is [i.e. there is dance] because of wonder” (*ibid.*: 8).

third case: when ‘Rāma’ appears in the Kūttu, the *rasa* changes from the Heroic (of Hanumān) to the Desperate (of Rāma). Just as in Bāli’s case, here again dance fulfills the role conferred by Abhinavagupta: “to ensure the cohesion of representation [...] when it comes to passing from one *rasa* to another” (Bansat-Boudon 2004).

Furthermore, in the Kūttu of the Ring, both cases where *kriya* is required present the act of ‘entering’: in the first, Hanumān enters the marvelous garden where he will find Sītā, and in the other one Rāma enters the Kūttu performance through the actor-Hanumān’s discourse and action. In this dramatic context, dance as well as the ablutions could have a purifying virtue: this would allow the actor-Hanumān to salute Sītā after a long journey and to bring ‘the God’ Rāma onstage (and maybe, in the first case, also Sītā herself). Based on this personal interpretation, dance would create a kind of meta-*pūrvaraṅga* or meta-*purapāṭṭu*. One cannot but be reminded that the actor ‘invokes the gods by dancing’ (as is the case in all *nityakriyas*): here, he could make Rāma, Sītā, and maybe even Hanumān, appear onstage as gods, not only as ‘characters’. To some extent, it seems to me that this interpretation could also be applied to Bāli’s case: here dance would ‘clean the place’ to make all the gods and demons enter onstage before they proceed to the Churning of the Ocean—a mythological act that creates the whole world—and maybe also in respect to Bāli himself, a great emperor (*cakravarti*), who will then ‘enter’ the battlefield and die onstage—a very rare if not unique phenomenon in Kūtiyāṭṭam.

Nevertheless, the opinions of the practitioners I questioned—among whom some told me that they had wondered about the role of these dances and questioned their gurus about it—are slightly different. In their opinion, the *kriyas* which are performed in the dramatic context of the Act of the Ring more generally recall/contain the devotional aim of the performance. For instance, the famous actress Uṣa Nañnyār expressed an opinion passed on to her by her gurus: “We insert dance before the most important moments to recall that our Kūttu is a danced offering”. The Aṅgulīyāṅkam Kūttu expert Paiṅkuḷam Nārāyaṇan Cākyār told me nearly the same thing using other words. As for

Rāma Cākyār, he explained that when dance appears in the Kūttu, “it creates a pause that makes the spectator meditate”.³⁹

Conclusion

In the same vein as conclusions reached in previous works on the Indian theory of theatre, we can affirm that within the context of the only practice of Sanskrit theatre, dance is distinct and independent from acting, and yet it is linked to the dramatic action and represents an important ingredient of the theatrical aesthetic process. I attempted to demonstrate here that the ‘cohesive role’ assumed by dance throughout the theatrical performance of Kūṭiyāṭṭam derives from the ritual nature of dance. In this context, the readymade English expression ‘ritual dance’ concretely designates a practice of dancing the rite, considering that the rite is here understood as a precise action that connects, via rhythmic movements, the actor, the stage, the dramatic action and the public to cosmic forces, and that echoes the devotional social context of the whole performance in the temple’s precinct and the participant’s everyday life. In my view, the micro-action of dancing translates the Hindu macro-conception not only of the world but also of the theatrical event, in the sense that the world represented on stage (as well as in the ritual action, to which the entire theatrical representation can also be assimilated) is closer to the cosmic model than to the social world.⁴⁰

On the first day of the performance, liminal dances allow the participants to transit from the socio-religious life to the theatrical, rhythmic and cosmic universe. Then, when dance appears in the drama, it establishes a ‘beautiful’ double distance with the emotional dramatic process on the one hand, and the entire performing event on the other. In fact, regardless whether the actor smiles when dancing or whether some

³⁹ Private communications, Trichur District, 2001–2003.

⁴⁰ See Bansat-Boudon 2004 about the roots of this idea in the Indian theory of theatre. About the social world and theatre in general, see Johan 2014, vol. 2: 898–900.

dance movements might appear to be ‘charming’, dance is here first and foremost expected/required to be exact and effective. Ritual obligations hide under the guise of dance movements that suspend the fiction to recall the devotional target of theatre and recontextualize its macrocosmic context. At this level—and to some extent at the level of the actor who merges with his ritually effective action when dancing—dance could act as the most powerfully distancing but also unifying factor of the epic aesthetic of Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

Finally, it is perhaps precisely through the danced-rites—liminal and interwoven processes, which are at the same time ‘enveloping’ processes—that the actors manage to ‘touch’ the divinity through theatre. Kūṭiyāṭṭam dances moreover show how ‘complex rites’ both contain and act upon the socioreligious context, whose focal point is the phenomenon of ‘divine theatre’ that they trigger.⁴¹

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⁴¹ I thank M. Houseman for suggesting me this last concluding words. On the subject and about the last quoted terms, see also Handelman 2004: 12ff.

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