

# Mudiyettu

## Ritual Dance-Drama of Kerala

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Mudiyettu is one of the ancient forms of dance-drama of Kerala. Mudiyettu presents a dramatized version of the Puranic story of *Darika-Vadha*. If we scrutinize the presentation and style of this ritual dance-drama, we discover the origins of certain elements of the style, presentation, costumes and choreography of the later classical art forms of Kerala such as Krishnanattom and Kathakali. Mudiyettu is usually performed in the Bhadrakali temples of Central Kerala as an oblation to the goddess. Since we have no records or evidence to indicate accurately the date of origin of this ritual dance-drama, all that we can surmise is that it is very ancient.

Bhadrakali worship has always occupied a very important place in the religious life of the people of Kerala. There are numerous Kali temples in Kerala. The story of Kali, especially the one detailing how she killed the *asura* Darika, is the theme of many folk-songs and is presented in several visual art forms in these temples.

### *An Outline of the Story*

Long, long ago there broke out a fierce war between the *deva-s* (gods) and *asura-s* (demons). The *asura-s* were on the brink of defeat, and their women sought refuge in *patala* (the nether-world). Two of them, Danavati and Darumati, who pined for sons who would wreak vengeance on the gods, propitiated Lord Brahma by strict penance and received boons from him. In due course, Danavati gave birth to a son named Danavendra and Darumati to a son named Darika. Darika performed rigorous austerities to propitiate Lord Brahma and secured from him boons which made him invincible to men, *asura-s* and gods. By virtue of these boons, he became the supreme lord of all the fourteen worlds and gained the strength of ten thousand elephants. Moreover, one of the boons from Brahma assured him that if a drop of blood of his body was shed and fell on the ground, a thousand mighty warriors, each as strong as himself, would immediately emerge from that drop of blood. But Darika made one mistake: he did not ask for a boon that made him unassailable to women.

In securing these boons, Darika, assisted by Danavendra and their *rakshasa* hosts, attacked and took possession of *Svarga-loka* (the abode of the gods). He then started persecuting the *deva-s* and *rishi-s*. When the situation became intolerable, the *deva-s* assembled to consider how they could escape from the attacks of Darika. At their request, Narada listed all the misdeeds of Darika on a palm-leaf, went with it to Kailasa and read its contents to Lord Shiva. Narada pleaded with Shiva that the menace from Darika should somehow be ended. Shiva, enraged by the atrocities of Darika, opened the third eye on his forehead, and almost immediately Bhadrakali rose, shaking the whole world. With the blessings of Shiva, Bhadrakali set out to fight Darika. On the way she met Vetali in the forest of Mahakala. Vetali had an insatiable thirst for blood. She agreed to carry

Bhadrakali on her back and also undertook to drink every drop of blood shed from Darika's body before it could touch the ground. Soon Bhadrakali and Vetali, accompanied by Kooli, one of Shiva's *bhuta*-s (attendant spirits), and Nandikeshvara (in the guise of a soldier called Koimbidar), reached Darika's capital. In a thunderous voice, which seemed to rend the sky, Bhadrakali challenged Darika to a fight.

Darika accepted the challenge and came out in his chariot, accompanied by Danavendra. When he realised that he was going to be defeated, he fled for life. In order to escape from Bhadrakali, Darika sought refuge in one world after another but the Devi followed him wherever he went. As a last resort, he fled to *patala* (the lower world) and hid himself in a cave. Kali followed him there. Finally, she cut off the heads of both Darika and Danavendra and presented them to Shiva. This is the bare outline of the Mudi yettu dance-drama.

The story of Bhadrakali and Darika is a representation of the good and evil tendencies in man and a picture of the eternal fight between *dharma* and *adhama* in the world around us.

#### *Costume and Makeup*

There are seven characters in Mudi yettu: Shiva, Narada, Darika, Danavendra, Bhadrakali, Kooli and Koimbidar (Nandikeshvara). *Chayiliyam* (red pigment), *Manayola* (yellow pigment), *Mashi* (a black eye-paste), *Manjal* (turmeric), rice-paste, caustic lime, indigo and other ingredients are used for the makeup on the face. The head-gears (*mudi*-s) and ornaments are made of wood; they are carved, gilded and jewelled, with artistic positioning of glass pieces, peacock feathers and even the shell of beetles.

The third eye is clearly marked on Shiva's forehead and *tilak*-s are drawn with rice-paste on Narada's forehead. Both Shiva and Narada wear *mudi* (head-gear). Darika and Danavendra use the same kind of makeup. Their faces are smeared with red, green and black paint. Above this colouring are projecting moles made of a thick rice and caustic lime mixture. They wear beautiful crowns on their head and thick white skirts, with lots of tucks (*mattu*). Bhadrakali's face is completely smeared with black paint and marked with white dots made of rice-paste. A thin veneer of red powder made out of a mixture of turmeric and caustic lime is smeared between the dots. The red petals of the *Chethi* flower are firmly pasted on the forehead, the tip of the nose and on the chin and both the cheeks. Two long, pointed metal teeth are fixed in the mouth. Bhadrakali's head-gear is called *Valiyamudi*. Kooli is a comic character and there are no conventional stipulations regarding her makeup. The face is painted in different colours depending on the fancy of the actors. Koimbidar is usually presented with the makeup of a typical Nair warrior of ancient times and he carries a sword and shield.

#### *Musical Instruments and Singing*

The musical instruments used in Mudi yettu are *Uruttuchenda*, *Veekuchenda* (drums), *Ilathalam* (cymbals) and *Shankh* (conch). The literary composition which forms the text for the performance of Mudi yettu is a blend of prose and verse. The language is a mixture of archaic Malayalam, Sanskrit and Tamil. Formerly, the

text was not written but used to be orally handed down from teacher to disciples. Naturally, it underwent changes with each generation. The songs were sung in the typical Sopana style of Kerala. There is also an element of stylisation in the dialogues. Koimbidar acts as the link between Mudi yettu and contemporary life. There is a pleasing blend of words and rhythmic syllables in his speech and a kind of veiled social criticism through a clever use of symbolic words. At times, we discover in his words profound philosophical ideas.

### *The Performance*

The performances of this dance-drama usually begin in the Malayalam month of Vrischikam (November-December) in the Bhadrakali temples of Kerala. Every year, the first performance is held in the Kalambukavu temple in the Ernakulam district. This is followed by performances, one after the other, in the temples of Padathukavu, Keezhkavu, Maradu, Vyttila, Tammanam, Cheppanam etc. This religious dance-drama is performed in these temples, adhering strictly to the style and conventions laid down by tradition. The performances continue till the end of May. The rites and conventions relating to the performance vary slightly from temple to temple.

Before the actual performance begins, and as its essential preliminary part, a large image (*Kalam*) of Bhadrakali is drawn on the floor. This *Kalam* is usually drawn on the floor of the *Valiyambalam* of the temple. The *Valiyambalam* is usually situated a little beyond the *Sreekovil* (the sanctum sanctorum) and the *Mandapa* (roofed platform) in front of it. The image of Kali is drawn very beautifully by an expert who employs different materials mainly powdered rice, paddy chapp-charcoal, turmeric, leaves of the Vaka tree, slaked lime etc. Rice powder is used when white colour is required; turmeric powder, where yellow colour is wanted; for black colour, paddy chapp-charcoal powder is used and red colour is obtained through a mixture of turmeric and slaked lime. The *Kalam* is usually drawn by members of the Kurup community who are experts in this work because it is their hereditary and traditional profession.

First of all, the place where the *Kalam* is to be drawn must be purified by smearing it with cow-dung paste. If it is a cement floor, it is washed with water. Then a *padmam* (a ritual picture) is drawn on the floor and *pooja* is performed before it. A coir net is now placed above the area where the *Kalam* is going to be drawn and right in the centre of that covering of coir net, a decorated silk cloth is spread so that it forms a canopy above the figure of Bhadrakali. The silk canopy is further adorned with flowers and surrounded by hangings of *Kuruttola* (long strips of coconut leaves). In some temples, this work of drawing the *Kalam* is finished in two or three hours. In others, the work is done in the afternoon from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. Bhadrakali's figure, as drawn in the *Kalam*, is terrifying and awe-inspiring. Her body is gigantic and jet-black in colour; her head seems to touch the sky; she has three red eyes that burn like fire; her mouth is like a large cave, with the red tongue stretched out fully; in the mouth can be seen two long sabre-like teeth; her thick wavy hair is like the rolling waves of the river Kalindi. She has several long strong arms which hold weapons: the sword, *vel* (spear), club, bow and arrows, and the trident. In one hand she holds the severed bleeding head of Darika. This is the picture of Bhadrakali that is usually

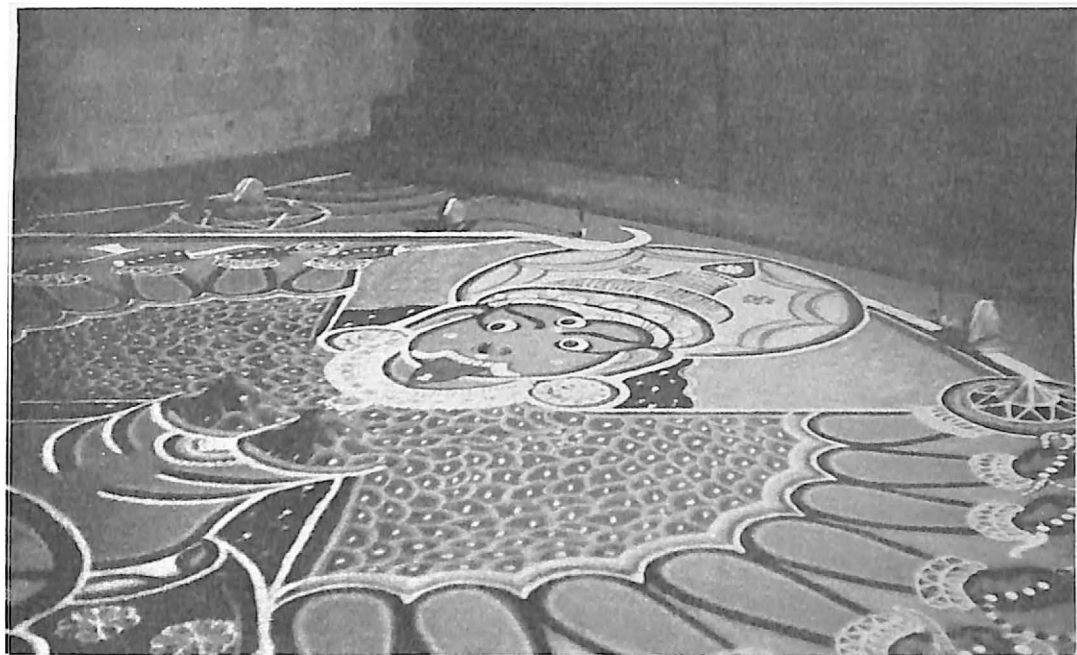
drawn in the *Kalam*. In the picture of Kali, a minimum of four hands are shown but eight, sixteen, thirty-two or sixty-four hands can also be drawn. Sometimes, Kali is shown as sitting on the back of Vetali. After drawing the *Kalam*, lighted *nilavilakku-s* (oil lamps) are placed on all the four sides of the *Kalam*; grain, paddy and coconuts are also placed around it.

When the drawing of the *Kalam* is over, a place for the performance of the Mudi yettu is chosen in the spacious compound within the outer walls of the temple. Instrumental music is played to announce to the public that Mudi yettu is going to be performed there. This method of announcing the ritual by beating drums and other musical instruments is called *Kotti-ariyippu* (*Kottu*=drum-beating and *ariyippu*=announcement).

After the last *Pooja* in the temple is over and the *Sreekovil* is closed, *Pooja-s* at the *Kalam* begin. In some temples, the Chief *Poojari* of the temple, who is usually a Namboothiri, performs the *Pooja-s* at the *Kalam*. In some temples, the Kurup, who has drawn the *Kalam*, performs the *Pooja-s*. When the *Pooja-s* are over, the *Kalam-pattu* (song) begins. The *Kalam-pattu* is a hymn in praise of Bhadrakali in which there is a detailed description of the features of Bhadrakali from head to foot. The *Kalam-pattu* is followed by a ceremony called *Etirelppu*. It is believed that Kali's soul is resting at the foot of the sacred tree in the temple. She has to be brought from the base of the tree by a suitable escort in a ceremonial way. This ritual is called *Etirelppu*. *Pooja-s* are performed at the foot of the sacred tree and a lamp is lit. This lamp is conceived as Kali. When this lamp is brought to the *Kalam*, a number of women holding *Talam-s* in their hands stand in a row on both sides of the path as an escort for the lamp. The lamp, escorted in this way and accompanied by instrumental music, is taken in *pradakshinam* (circumambulation) and placed in front of the *Kalam*. Songs praising the glory of Bhadrakali are sung and then, with the permission of those present, the Kurup or the *Poojari* wipes off the *Kalam*. After erasing the *Kalam*, the mixture of coloured powders used for drawing the *Kalam* is distributed among the devotees present as *prasadam*. Hundreds of devotees come from very distant places to receive a little of this *prasadam*. In some temples, this *Kalam-pooja* and the connected ceremonies are performed consecutively for forty-one days and Mudi yettu is performed on the last day.

As soon as the *Kalam* is erased and the *prasadam* distributed, the proceedings for the presentation of Mudi yettu begin. Mudi yettu is performed in a large open space in the temple compound. No special stage or platform is necessary for the performance. The only stage requirements are a *Nilavilakku* (lamp) about four feet in height, a wooden stool and a *Tiraseela* (curtain). The main acting area is round the *Nilavilakku*. The audience may stand or sit some distance away from this acting area. A cotton wick, lit either from the lamp at the *Kalam* or from the lamp in the green room, where the actors are engaged in their makeup, is brought to the stage and with it the *Nilavilakku* is lit. This ceremony is usually performed by a distinguished local personality. The lighting of the lamp is followed by a function called *Arangu-Keli*. *Arangu-Keli* consists of a fine performance of playing the instruments *Chenda* (drum) and *Ilathalam* (cymbals). After this the curtain is held stretched by two persons, just behind the *Nilavilakku*, each holding one end of the curtain. The singers and the instrumentalists stand behind the curtain. First they

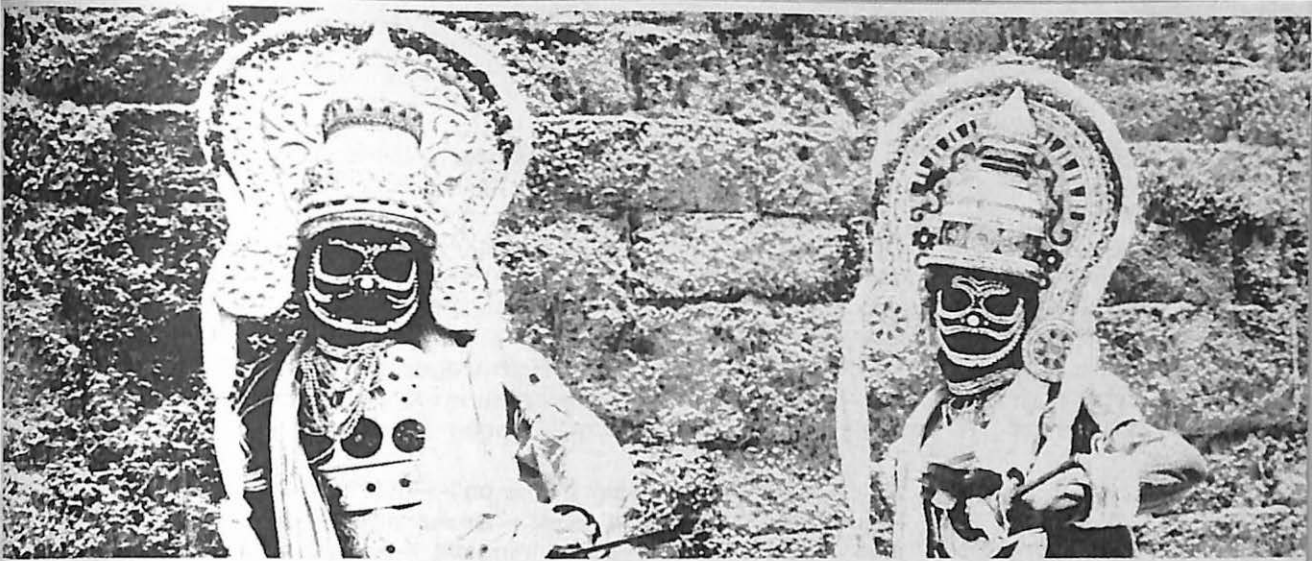
*Glimpses of a Mudiyettu performance held at the National Centre for the Performing Arts on April 28, 1983.*



sing the *Vandana-Shloka* (invocation song). When this is over, Shiva and Narada appear on the stage. Shiva stands on the stool behind the curtain in such a way that only the upper half of his body is visible to the audience, the lower half being hidden by the curtain. The head of a bull carved out of wood is seen just in front of Shiva. The suggestion is that Shiva is sitting on his bull on Mount Kailasa. Narada appears in front of the curtain with a palm-leaf in his hand. He bows respectfully to Shiva and then enumerates the misdeeds of Darika and the numerous complaints of the *deva*-s against him.

Darika appears in the next scene. Standing behind the curtain he clutches the upper edge of the curtain with both the hands and tries to pull it down. This action is accompanied by roars and jumps and other violent movements. This is his way of showing his might and valour. Then suddenly he leaves the main acting area, runs into the midst of the spectators, and moves around engaged in violent circular movements and jumps. Then he returns to the main acting area near the lamp, stands upon the stool, looks around him in all the four directions with a challenging and defiant look, expressing total confidence in himself and supreme contempt for gods and men. In the meantime, Kali enters from behind Darika, stands holding the curtain and issues a counter-challenge to Darika. A short meeting between Kali and Darika is shown after which Darika disappears. Kali repeats her challenge to Darika in the next short scene. This is followed by Kali's *rangapooja* in honour of Shiva. Regarding the *Nilavilakku* as Shiva, Kali worships it, offering oblations of *Chethi* flowers taken from her own head-gear. She then performs a devotional dance before Shiva (the *Nilavilakku*) taking three steps forward and three steps backward. Then she dances round the *Nilavilakku* with quick rhythmic movements. After this she goes round the temple, accompanied by the beating of drums and other instruments and big torches, the flames of which are frequently kindled by throwing *tellipodi* (an inflammable powder prepared from the gum of a tree) into them. A large procession of people follows her in this *pradakshina*. On such occasions, the whole body of spectators accompany Kali. Then Kali returns to the main acting area and the characters Koimbidar and Kooli also come onto the stage. When Koimbidar enters and takes his stand, the drummers ask him some questions to which he gives appropriate replies. Koimbidar sings hymns in praise of Shiva, Saraswati and Sri Narayana and then very briefly narrates through a song the story of how Ganapati was born as the son of Shiva and Parvati. Next he offers a prayer for the successful completion of that day's *Mudiyettu*. The comic character, Kooli, often mingles with the spectators and entertains them with her jokes and antics. These two characters are deliberately introduced to reduce the tension of the fighting scenes of *Mudiyettu*. In the course of the fight with Darika, the actor who plays the part of Kali often takes leave of his senses, runs round the temple again and again and frequently loses all self-control. On such occasions Koimbidar follows Kali trying to restrain her and Kooli, with her jokes and comic behaviour, tries to mitigate Kali's anger.

Next comes the fight scene. Kali encounters Darika and Danavendra. The fight continues with unabated ferocity for two hours. Music, the playing of musical instruments and huge torches—the flames of which are kindled with *tellipodi*—add to the horror of the fight. Kali and her opponents leave the stage and run round the temple in the course of the fight. When the fight reaches the



Glimpses of a Mudiyettu performance held at the National Centre for the Performing Arts on April 28, 1983.



peak of its intensity, Kali's head-gear is removed so as to remind the actor of his normal human identity. The actor who plays that part is forcibly brought to the stage and made to sit and rest. While sitting there, the head-gear is once more tied to Kali's head. This is followed by a short mock fight at the end of which Kali kills Darika and Danavendra. The head-gears of Darika and Danavendra are removed to signify that their heads are now cut off. Once, at a Mudi yettu performance, the actor who played the part of Kali, actually cut off the head of the actor who played the part of Darika. To avoid such tragedies, this convention of removing the head-gear, as a symbolic representation of cutting off the head, was introduced and that has been followed ever since.

Mudi yettu is conducted by devotees in the belief that it will ward off the epidemic of small-pox, protect the people from enemies and ensure prosperity and happiness for the villagers. From the beginning till the end of a Mudi yettu performance, burning torches are held aloft. *Tellipodi*, when burnt, sends out smoke which has germicidal properties. This may be the scientific basis for the belief that Mudi yettu will prevent an outbreak of small-pox or other such diseases.

### *The Artistes*

Traditionally, the performance of Mudi yettu has been a monopoly of the Marar community. But the drawing of the *Kalam* was the privilege of the members of the Kurup community. But, in actual practice, Kurups also have become actors in Mudi yettu and many Marars have shown great proficiency in drawing *Kalam*-s. The Marars have been traditionally the professional drummers in temples at the time of *pooja*-s. This hereditary work of the Marars is called *Kooti-Padi-Seva*. There are at present only three or four troupes of artistes who are competent to present Mudi yettu in its pure and authentic style. Of these the most famous is the Pazhur family (of Piravom in Ernakulam District), descended from the renowned 'Kunnakal' family which had handled Mudi yettu for centuries. Well-known Mudi yettu artistes like Kunchu Marar, Ravunni Marar and Achu Marar were members of the Pazhur family. Kunjan Marar, the leader of the Pazhur troupe for forty-five years, died in 1982. The Sangeet Natak Akademi honoured him with an award in 1981. The present leader of the Pazhur troupe is his son Damodara Marar. The Department of Culture of the Government of India recently conferred upon him a Junior Fellowship which no doubt is a great encouragement to the Pazhur Mudi yettu tradition. The temples have been able to give very little remuneration and encouragement to the practitioners of this art, which is why young men today are not attracted to it any more. They are, therefore, very unwilling to follow their ancestral and traditional profession. Formerly, Mudi yettu artistes and their families were given agricultural land and other financial assistance and they could maintain themselves in comfort without depending completely on the meagre income from their art. But, today, their economic condition is quite deplorable.

A Mudi yettu artiste must have proficiency in the arts of singing, drumming, dancing and drawing *Kalam*-s. He must also have at least six years' training and experience of actually participating in performances. The *Natanakairali*, an association of more than a hundred traditional artistes, has now started working in earnest to revive this dying art and to secure for it greater recognition and popularity both inside and outside Kerala.