

Tholpavakoothu Kerala's Traditional Shadow Puppet Art

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Tholpavakoothu represents one of Kerala's oldest ritual performing traditions where shadow puppetry is integrated into temple worship, reflecting a deep blend of storytelling, devotion, and community-based cultural practice.

About Tholpavakoothu

Tholpavakoothu is a **ritual-based shadow puppet theatre tradition of Kerala**, performed mainly in **Bhagavathy temples** as an offering to **Goddess Bhadrakali**.

- It literally means **"leather puppet show"** in Malayalam, where thole means leather, pava means puppet, and koothu means performance.
- It is mainly **practised in Thrissur, Palakkad, and Malappuram districts of Kerala**.
- The performance takes place inside a temple theatre structure called **Koothumadam**.
- A white cloth screen is used, and shadows are created using oil lamps known as **vilakku**.
- Puppets are made from treated animal hide, usually deer skin, and are finely carved and painted.
- The traditional performers belong to the **Pulavar community**, and the lead performer is called the **Pulavar**.
- The Pulavar sings, narrates, and controls the puppets simultaneously during performance.
- The art form is based on stories from the **Kamba Ramayanam, the Tamil version of the Ramayana by Kamban**.

- A full performance cycle can last 21, 41, or even 71 nights, making it **one of India's longest folk performances**.
- Musical instruments like **chenda, ilathalam, shankhu, and kuzhal** are used for accompaniment.
- It is performed strictly as a **ritual offering to the deity**, based on the myth that Goddess Bhadrakali missed the war between Rama and Ravana because she was busy killing the demon Darika.
- It is recognised under India's **intangible cultural heritage** framework and supported by the **Sangeet Natak Akademi**.
- Major challenges include declining patronage, youth migration, and restrictions on traditional raw materials.

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/tholpavakoothu/>

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