

Karman Kuttu: A Living Ritual Drama Tradition in Konkodiyawa Village, Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka

Dr. Nishshanka Abeyrathna.

Head of the Department Department of South Indian Music, University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

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ABSTRACT

This research critically examines Karman Kuttu, a distinctive ritual drama tradition performed by the Tamil Hindu community in Kon Kodiyawa village, located in the Nuwara Eliya District of Sri Lanka. Deeply rooted in the region's intangible cultural heritage, Karman Kuttu functions as both a sacred offering and a vital mode of performance tradition within local temple festivals. Utilizing an ethnographic study approach, the research incorporates field observations, participant interviews, and photographic documentation to explore the narrative, musical elements, costumes, and symbolic meanings integral to the performance. This study not only documents the performative elements of Karman Kuttu but also evaluates its cultural significance and sustainability challenges within contemporary socio-economic conditions. This research advocates for enhanced cultural preservation efforts to safeguard Karman Kuttu and underscores its significance in representing Sri Lanka's diverse cultural and religious identities.

Keywords: Karman Kuttu, Ritual drama, Tamil Hindu community, Intangible cultural heritage, Performance tradition

INTRODUCTION

Despite its cultural significance, Karman Kuttu remains an understudied tradition, with limited scholarly documentation. Folk drama traditions have long been pivotal in articulating the religious beliefs, social values, and cultural memory of communities worldwide. In Sri Lanka's central highlands, the ritual drama known as Karman Kuttu represents a significant yet understudied aspect of Tamil Hindu cultural expression. This traditional performance, which intertwines theatrical narrative, devotional music, and symbolic enactment, is practiced primarily in Kon Kodiyawa village, located in the Nuwara Eliya District.

The present study aims to document and analyze the performative and ritualistic dimensions of Karman Kuttu, with a focus on its role within the Tamil Hindu community's religious festivals and cultural life. Employing ethnographic methods—including participant observation, interviews with local practitioners, and photographic documentation—this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on intangible cultural heritage preservation in Sri Lanka. Particular emphasis is placed on understanding the contemporary challenges faced by Karman Kuttu, including generational shifts, modernization, and socio-economic pressures, which threaten the continuity of this rich folk tradition.

Historical Background

Over the decades, these traditions were indigenized, acquiring ritual features distinct from their South Indian origins. The origins of Karman Kuttu are closely linked to the folk theatrical and ritual traditions of Tamil Hindu communities in South India, which was brought to Sri Lanka during the colonial period. Tamil laborers and settlers, especially those working in the central hill plantations, adapted and localized these performance traditions, integrating them into the religious and social fabric of their new environment.

In Kon Kodiyawa village, Karman Kuttu is primarily performed during annual temple festivals dedicated to deities such as Mariamman, Kali, and Murugan. These festivals serve both devotional and communal functions,

reinforcing religious faith while fostering social cohesion among village members. The performance typically includes a blend of mythological storytelling, ritual invocation, music, dance, and symbolic costume, reflecting a syncretism of Tamil folk beliefs and local cultural practices.

Over time, Karman Kuttu has become a marker of cultural identity for the Tamil Hindu population in the region. Despite its deep-rooted significance, the tradition faces ongoing challenges, including declining youth participation and the encroachment of modern entertainment forms. Preservation efforts thus require not only documentation but also active community engagement and institutional support

Socio-Cultural Context

Karman Kuttu occupies a central place in the socio-cultural life of the Tamil Hindu community in Kon Kodiyawa. Beyond its function as religious entertainment, the performance acts as a communal ritual that reinforces social bonds and affirms collective identity. It is intricately linked to local Hindu temple festivals, where it serves to honor deities and solicit their blessings for agricultural prosperity and communal well-being. The tradition fosters intergenerational knowledge transfer, involving elders as custodians and youth as performers. Additionally, Karman Kuttu reflects syncretic influences from both Tamil and Sri Lankan folk practices, highlighting the cultural hybridity present in the region.

Performance Structure and Music

The structure of Karman Kuttu typically begins with a ritual invocation, followed by a series of mythological narratives enacted by performers embodying divine and heroic figures. Music plays an essential role, featuring traditional Tamil percussion instruments such as the thappattai and dholak, complemented by vocal chants and hymns. The rhythmic patterns and melodic structures are designed to evoke devotional fervor and heighten dramatic tension. Performers use a combination of stylized gestures, dance movements, and spoken dialogue to convey the story, often engaging directly with the audience to maintain an interactive atmosphere.

Costumes, Props, And Stage Design

Costumes in Karman Kuttu are vivid, symbolic, and deeply ritualistic, utilizing brightly colored fabrics, masks, and body paint to distinguish divine characters and demons. The use of masks is especially significant, representing transformation and spiritual possession during the ritual. Props such as swords, tridents, and ceremonial umbrellas further enhance the theatricality and religious symbolism of the performance. The stage is usually a simple open space near the temple premises, decorated with floral garlands, lamps, and sacred symbols, emphasizing the ritual over theatrical extravagance.

Current Practices in Nuwara Eliya/Konkodiya

Today, Karman Kuttu remains a vibrant but vulnerable tradition in Konkodiya and surrounding areas. While the performance continues to be an integral feature of temple festivals, participation has declined, particularly among younger generations who face economic migration and competing interests. Nonetheless, local committees and cultural activists are making efforts to revive interest through community workshops, documentation projects, and collaboration with cultural institutions. These efforts are critical for sustaining the tradition's relevance in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

Field Study Observations

During the recent field visit to Konkodiya, direct observation of a Karman Kuttu performance revealed the deep emotional engagement (devotional, communal, performative) of both performers and audience members. Interviews with key informants highlighted the community's pride in the tradition and concern over its future. Visual Documentation captured the intricate costume details, expressive gestures, and communal participation integral to the event. These findings underscore the richness of Karman Kuttu as a living cultural practice and the urgent need for preservation measures.



Figure 1. Karman Kuttu performers and musicians during a ritual performance (Photo by N. Abeyrathna, 2025).



Figure 2. Karman Kuttu performers in elaborate costumes and symbolic makeup during the ritual (Photo by N. Abeyrathna, 2025).



Figure 3. Audience participation and the village environment during the performance (Photo by N. Abeyrathna, 2025).



Figure 4. Ritual offerings and performers in ceremonial attire (Photo by N. Abeyrathna, 2025).

Challenges And Preservation Efforts

Karman Kuttu faces significant challenges including diminishing youth involvement, financial constraints, and the encroachment of mass media entertainment. Economic migration reduces the pool of available performers, while modern education systems offer little support for traditional arts. Preservation efforts thus require a multifaceted approach: formal documentation, government and NGO support, integration into educational curricula, and community-driven initiatives to stimulate local pride and participation.

CONCLUSION

Karman Kuttu exemplifies the enduring power of folk ritual drama to sustain cultural identity and communal cohesion within Sri Lanka's Tamil Hindu communities. Despite contemporary challenges, the tradition continues to embody spiritual devotion, artistic expression, and social unity. This research highlights the necessity of comprehensive preservation strategies to ensure that Karman Kuttu remains a vibrant part of Sri Lanka's intangible cultural heritage for future generations. Integrating Karman Kuttu into national heritage frameworks and community-based safeguarding programs is essential for its future survival.

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