

**Name of the Element:** Kutiyattam, Sanskrit theatre

**Community/ies:** Kutiyattam artists

**Region:** Kerala

**Brief Description:** Kutiyattam, Sanskrit theatre, which is practiced in the province of Kerala, is one of India's oldest living theatrical traditions. Originating more than 2,000 years ago, Kutiyattam represents a synthesis of Sanskrit classicism and reflects the local traditions of Kerala. In its stylized and codified theatrical language, neta abhinaya (eye expression) and hasta abhinaya (the language of gestures) are prominent. They focus on the thoughts and feelings of the main character. Actors undergo ten to fifteen years of rigorous training to become fully-fledged performers with sophisticated breathing control and subtle muscle shifts of the face and body. The actor's art lies in elaborating a situation or episode in all its detail. Therefore, a single act may take days to perform and a complete performance may last up to 40 days. Kutiyattam is traditionally performed in theatres called Kuttampalams, which are located in Hindu temples. Access to performances was originally restricted owing to their sacred nature, but the plays have progressively opened up to larger audiences. Yet the actor's role retains a sacred dimension, as attested by purification rituals and the placing of an oil lamp on stage during the performance symbolizing a divine presence. The male actors hand down to their trainees detailed performance manuals, which, until recent times, remained the exclusive and secret property of selected families. With the collapse of patronage along with the feudal order in the nineteenth century, the families who held the secrets to the acting techniques experienced serious difficulties. After a revival in the early twentieth century, Kutiyattam is once again facing a lack of funding, leading to a severe crisis in the profession. In the face of this situation, the different bodies responsible for handing down the tradition have come together to join efforts in order to ensure the continuity of this Sanskrit theatre.

Kutiyattam, Sanskrit Theatre- Inscribed in 2008 in the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, UNESCO