

CHANGES IN KUTIYATTAM: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

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The following remarks are based in part on an invited address I delivered on December 3, 2006 to a Seminar on Kutiyattam: *The Problems of Communication* on the occasion of the 10th Yearly Celebration of the International Centre of Kutiyattam in Tripunithura, Kerala.

Much has happened since UNESCO declared Kutiyattam one of nineteen Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritages of Humanity in 2001.

The primary site for the study and performance of Kutiyattam is still Kerala but a very different Kerala from the one I remember when I first began to study Kutiyattam in 1974. In the 1970s Kutiyattam was not well-known or understood among students and scholars of theater and Sanskrit in India or abroad. Even in Kerala it was considered a dying art, a pale reminder of Kerala's link to the ancient past, a relic of the temple culture that had been decimated by the land reform acts passed after Independence. The designation by UNESCO signals that a page has turned for Kutiyattam. Among some of the changes that I have noted are as follows.

Among the more important developments that have just begun to have an impact on the art is the Internet that now offers many people around the world ready access to websites containing text materials, photographs, and films on Kutiyattam. The Internet offers seemingly unlimited potential for growth in materials on Kutiyattam and other Kerala genres of performance. Among the sites that address Kutiyattam in whole or in part are the following:

<http://www.kutiyattam.in/>

<http://www.margitheatre.org/>

<http://www.ammannurgurukulam.com/>

http://web.mac.com/ludwigpesch/Natanakairali_new/Welcome.html

<http://www.kutiyattam.com/>

<http://www.mykerala.net/koodiyattom/kutiyattam.html>

<http://kutiyattam.wikispaces.com/>

Visual materials are now more readily available in the market place for those who are looking for examples of Kutiyattam performance. The handsome disks on Kutiyattam and Nangyar Kuttu available in DVD and VCD format by Invis are a positive contribution. Margi has produced three excellent DVDs based on the material filmed by the distinguished filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Margi's website promises the potential of 11 hours of material on the subject in the not too distant future, I trust. Natana Kairali in Irinjalakuda, Margi Madhu and Kerala Kalamandalam have brought out VCDs and DVDs that are handsome and useful windows into the world of performance. My own CD-ROM produced by the University of Michigan Press offers considerable material, both visual and aural, as well as textual for those who are interested. And there are several programs, formatted on NTSC videotape, each over an hour long on Kutiyattam and other genres of Asian performance, created at Michigan State University and available from that university at http://orders.dip.msu.edu/category_s/19.htm or from Insight Media, NY (www.insight-media.com). Another example is the rich video collection at Würzburg University, Germany, by Heidrun Brückner and Heike Moser: <http://www.indologie.uni-wuerzburg.de/bhasa/video-listen/index.html>. I'm sure that there must be more visual materials with which I am not familiar. Some years ago I purchased two videotapes in PAL format from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi. I suspect that there are priceless other materials on Kutiyattam lingering in its archives just waiting to be developed and distributed.

Nangyar Kuttu, long considered dormant, is now being actively revived. Nangyar Kuttu is the female equivalent of Kutiyattam. It draws its performance

score from the Srikrishnacaritam, an offshoot of Act II of King Kulasekharavarman's Sanskrit play Subhadradhananjayam. When I first came to Kerala the art seemed dead and no one appeared interested in it. Today the picture has entirely changed and there is a call for performances and young girls seem to be clamoring to study it at the Kerala Kalamandalam and the other training centers elsewhere in Kerala. There is even a Nangyar Kuttu fan club in Trichur. Due to the efforts of many individuals, among them Diane Daugherty, Nirmala Panikkar, Usha Nangyar, Margi Sathi, Kalamandalam Girija, and P.K. Narayanan Nambiar, and perhaps many others, another art has been rescued from obscurity and near extinction. Today there are at least 34 women who are trained to perform Nangyar Kuttu and the female roles in Kutiyattam. When I was first in Kerala I saw no more than four nangyars perform and that too only in Kutiyattam.

When I came to Kerala the Kerala Kalamandalam was the only major center for the study of Kutiyattam. Today, that is not the case. Kalaries have sprung up in Lakkidi, Irinjalakuda, Thiruvanthapuram, Painkulam, and up to December 2006 there are those started by P.K. Narayanan Nambiar, Usha Nangyar, and Margi Madhu in their own homes. The character of the attractive venues in these new centers of study offers a welcome contrast to the cold concrete structure of the Kalamandalam and seems more in keeping with an older and more interesting style of Kerala architecture.

It seems to me that the level of sophistication of the *mizhavu* drumming, the large number of new young artists, and the vigor and subtlety of their playing has provided an opportunity for the actors to extend and expand the range of their *bhava* and *rasa*. In 2006 I saw performances by actors who were enormously aided by this new generation of talented drummers. To me this is a positive direction of both arts.

Mizhavu drumming has become so popular that *mizhavu thayambaka* has come into being and appears to be recognized as an independent form of artistic expression. *Thimala* as well as the *idakka* have been used in several performances I have seen but the *kurum kuzhal* is nowhere to be seen any more. In the 1970s I remember *kuzhal* was used in several different performances both inside and outside the *kuttampalam*

but *idakka* was rare. I never saw a *thimala* used in those days. Why these changes have come about I am not in a position to speculate.

I detect a relaxation of rules regarding admission to some Kerala temples and have heard stories of non-Hindus gaining admission to see the *kuttampalams* and witness Kuttu, Nangyar Kuttu, and Kutiyattam performances. What apparently still remains in place is the rule that only those with hereditary rights to perform in the temples may do so. With an increase in the number of non-hereditary artists and changing social conditions this restrict may well be relaxed, if not eliminated altogether, in future years.

The pace of performances seems to have slowed down a bit. Indeed, the artists do not seem eager to speed through a performance for fear of boring their audience. This leisurely pace appears to be in keeping with the character of the art and allows the artists to fully explore the *bhava* and *rasa* inherent within individual works.

In recent years a flurry of research and publication has occurred both in India and in Europe focusing on various aspects of Kutiyattam and Nangyar Kuttu. For a thorough list of books and articles on the subject I draw your attention to Dr. Heike Moser's excellent bibliography published in this newsletter, entitled, "New Literature on Kutiyattam since 2000." The work contains reference to many interesting articles, as well as books.

Here I will take the liberty of mentioning the books that I find particularly valuable. They are arranged by date of publication to draw attention to the contribution of the UNESCO designation that drew scholarly attention to these endangered arts.

In 2000, Bharatiya Book Cooperation in Delhi published K.G. Paulose's *Bhagavadajjukam in Kutiyattam: The Hermit and the Harlot, the Sanskrit farce in Performance*. In the same year and by the same publisher Paulose published *Bhima in Search of Celestial Flower: Nilakanthakavi Kalyanasaugandhikavyayoga, a Sanskrit play with English translation*. Both plays are performed in the Kutiyattam repertory.

And again in the same year, the late L.S. Rajagopalan's *Kudiyattam: Preliminaries and Performance* was published by the Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute (Chennai). The work provides many useful new insights on the subject.

In 2001, N.P. Unni and Bruce M. Sullivan published yet another play performed in Kutiyattam, *The Wedding of Arjuna and Subhadra: The Kutiyattam Drama Subhadra-Dhananjaya*. Nag Publishers in Delhi brought out the work.

Margi Madhu's *The Road Signs of Acting* published in Malayalam by the International Centre for Kutiyattam in Thripunithura in 2002 provides a wealth of details concerning acting families and their obligations to various temples in Kerala. G. Venu's *Into the World of Kutiyattam with the legendary Ammannur Madhava Chakyar*, was published by Natana Kairali at Irinjalakuda in 2002. The late Ammannur Madhava Chakyar was among the last remaining artists of the older generation of expert performers when he passed away in 2006. Some considered him the greatest actor of all the artists of Kutiyattam. In this same year, I brought out *Kutiyattam: Sanskrit Theater of India*. The University of Michigan Press published this as a Multimedia-CD-ROM. While it contains much that is useful about Kutiyattam the CD-ROM technology has long since been replaced by the Internet. For example, my <http://www.kutiyattam.wikispaces.com> offer the potential of instant correction and modification which the CD-ROM was never designed to do.

2003 saw the publication of *Improvisations in Ancient Theatre* by K. G. Paulose published by the International Centre for Kutiyattam. It concerns the text and performance of Kaanchukeeyam from an 11th century Sanskrit text performed by Margi Madhu, the Kutiyattam actor.

Surprisingly, there were no new books on Kutiyattam or Nangyar Kuttu in 2004 but in 2005 *Nangiar Koothu: The Classical Dance-Theatre of the Nangiar-s* was revised by Nirmala Paniker based on her first edition in 1992 and published in English by Natana Kairali in Irinjalakuda. This important text provides extensive details about Nangyar Kuttu. In the same year and by the same press G. Venu published *Kathakali, Kutiyattam and Other Performing Arts: Fifty Years of Theatrical Exploration*. P.K. Narayanan Nambiar edited a group of essays in Malayalam entitled *Manjoosha* concerning his father, the late Padmashree Mani Madhava Chakyar. The work was published in Palakkad in 2005.

In 2006 the first lavishly illustrated work on the Kutiyattam to be published in India was brought out

by K.G. Paulose. *Kutiyattam Theatre: the Earliest Living Tradition*, published by D.C. books in Kottayam contains a wide variety of useful and interesting material and speculations on the origin, history, and development of this great art.

In 2007 Dr. P. Venugopalan's *Kutiyattam Register* was published by Margi in Thiruvananthapuram. The work contains considerable information and photographs both students and scholars may find useful. It considerably expands the scope of the useful March 1995 *Kutiyattam Mohatsavam* published by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi. *The Power of Performance* edited by Heidrun Bruckner, Elizabeth Schombuchner and Phillip Zarrilli was published by Manohar in New Delhi in 2007. The work contains relevant articles on Kutiyattam and Nangyar Kuttu by Bozena and Moser, among others.

In 2008 Heike Moser's Ph.D. thesis completed at the University of Würzburg was published as *Nannyar-Kuttu – ein Teilaspekt des Sanskrittheaterkomplexes Kutiyattam: Historische Entwicklung und performative Textumsetzung*. The work was published at Wiesbaden by Harrassowitz and awarded the prestigious Ernst-Waldschmidt-Preis 2008.

No books were published in 2009 but in 2010 L.S. Rajagopalan's *Temple Musical Instruments of Kerala* was published posthumously by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (New Delhi) in recognition of the importance of the writings of Mr. Rajagopalan to the field of Kerala musical and theater arts. The work contains slightly revised reprints of previously published articles on musical instruments of Kerala some of which are used exclusively in Kutiyattam and Nangyar Kuttu. 2010 also saw the publication of Arya Madhavan's *Kudiyattam Theatre and the Actor's Consciousness* listed as volume 25 of *Consciousness Literature & the Arts* and published in Amsterdam and New York. According to the publisher's website the work, "explores the training methods, performance and aesthetics of Kudiyattam, the oldest existing theater form in the world." (www.rodopi.nl/senj.asp?Bookid=CLA+25#)

And finally, 2011 saw the publication of *Between Fame and Shame. Performing Women: Women Performers in India* by Harrassowitz in Wiesbaden. The collection of fascinating essays, some of which deal with Nangyar Kuttu and Kutiyattam, was edited by Heidrun Bruckner, Hanne de Bruin and Heike Moser.

Experiments with stage lighting in various venues outside the temples may eventually produce a solution to the problem of how to properly light the performance area that has plagued Kutiyattam since I first saw it performed in Vatakunnathan Temple in 1974. With the development of more affordable lighting instruments individuals are making strides. However, I see the need for a concerted effort on the part of those who value stage lighting as an art to advise the artists about the kinds of lights and their placement and control that is both useful and tasteful.

Unfortunately, I sense an absence of seasoned critics ready to express their frank and considered opinions to the artists about their performances. With the passing of Appukkuttan Nair and L.S. Rajagopalan, as well as the aging of a generation of Kutiyattam

and Nangyar Kuttu buffs, I do not see critics who are willing and able to advise the artists on the quality of their work. On the other hand, published criticism of both arts has increased. Unfortunately, many of the newspaper critics are not well-qualified to appraise the quality of a performance and so often only express their opinions in the most general and vague of terms. We need today educated, seasoned critics who have considerable knowledge and background in the arts and who are not afraid to express their opinions, whether published or unpublished.

Undoubtedly, there are many more changes that have taken place. The UNESCO designation has played a positive role in invigorating interest in this unique and important representative of India's ancient artistic past. ❁



Photo courtesy: H. Moser

Ammannūr Paramēśvara Cākṣār in the role of the Sūtradhāran, performing in the kūtampalam of Tirumaṇḍānkunnu Bhagavati Kṣētram; Aṅṅāṭipuraṁ, 26.03.1996.