A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE

INDIAN FOLKLIFE

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 1 JULY 2001

Religion and Folklife

Contents

NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE

INDIAN FOLKLIFE

The focus of July issue is on Religion, and Folklife. The space of Religon offers the folklorist an inexhaustible multiple choice of layers. It is also an expression of public right and includes elements of both religious and secular kinds, metaphoric dimensions of linguistic as well as social. We are thankful to Lakshmi Raghavan (lakshmiraghavan@yahoo.com) for editorial assistance.

We invite submissions of articles, illustrations, reports, reviews offering historical, fieldwork oriented, articles in English on works in other languages, multi-disciplinary and cultural approaches to folklore. Articles should confirm to the latest edition of *MLA style manual*.

Cover Illustration:

Mansingh Dhanji Rathwa, Pithora Chitrakar from Malaja village, Gujrat. Courtesy: The Hindu, Chennai

National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) *is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking and publications. The aim of the centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multi-disciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues and folklore advocacy with public programming events. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.*

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NEXT ISSUE

The October issue is on *Museums, Folklife and Visual Culture*. Closing date for submission of articles for the next issue is October 1, 2001. All Communications should be addressed to:

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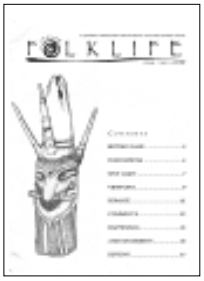

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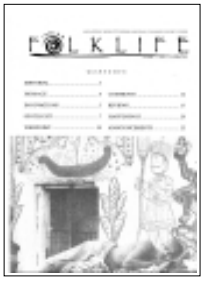

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'Removing the skin of a tamarind fruit': Rebellion and mysticism of Tamil Siddhars

M.D. Muthukumaraswamy

Why is it a redundancy to say 'rebellion and mysticism'? Why is that in all religions mystics are seen as rebels in their own life time but canonical masters for succeeding generations? My intention in raising these questions is to throw a few hypotheses that might be of use to folklorists engaged in analysing social lives of religious texts. While writing these lines during my travels far from my homeland, my mind is reverberating with the poetic lines of Tamil siddhars who were wanderers, mystics, mendicants, poets, alchemists, social reformers and philosophers.

As Tamil mythology would have it Agastya, the dwarf sage who was sent to the South India by God Shiva is believed to be the first primordial Siddhar. Agastya lived and taught in the Pothigai hills of Western Ghats located in the southern Tamil Nadu and his students including the famous grammarian Tolkappiar and Bogar wrote primary texts on Tamil grammar, music, medicine and astronomy. Tamil folk knowledge would teach us to accept that there were totally eighteen (a sacred number) or one hundred and eight Siddhars (another sacred number) through out the five thousand years of history of Tamil language and landscape. Depending on the local lore that would inevitably link the local temple myth with the Siddhars (rough translation would mean the wise ones or the accomplished ones) sometimes their total number could be even one thousand and eight.

Although the philosophical linkages that unified medicine, language, music and astrology into one comprehensible grand system are lost the common scale based on 'mattirai' (fraction of a second) for measuring heart beat, phoneme, musical note and birth time indicate the possibility of a system existing in the past. The common unifying themes of Tamil Siddhars were to see human body as the microcosm of the universe and the possibility of human evolution as the accomplishment of the universe. No wonder they placed human beings in a matrix of medicine, grammar, music and astronomy.

Although several anthologies of Siddhar poetry had been published few illuminating articles exist on the interpretations of their complex riddle like expressions of philosophy. M.P. Somu's volumes on Siddhars relate their philosophy to hada yogic practices and Saiva Siddantha. But such systematisation is highly resisted by several Siddhars. For instance Kakapusundar wrote against the hada yogic conceptualisation of human body with nine upward moving points of energy. He proposed in his 'Peru Nool' (Big book) that all the nine points were there in the brain and thus initiating a new secret society of medicinal practitioners. If their texts resist systematisation their anti-establishment voice place them beyond organised religion. Sivavakkiar's famous lines against the people going around and around the planted stones in the temples are good examples from a big corpus of poetry against rituals and mechanical practices. Religious practice for him would mean removing inner attachments like the skin of tamarind fruits and building up an inner god of psychic rhythm. This inner god would resonate with the music of the universe consisting of infinite empty space, minerals and plants that vibrate with the chemical complexes of the brain and casteless people who would embody the evolutionary urges in human beings.

The Siddhars expressed their mystical thought through highly localised metaphors involving things such as tamarind fruit, lotus flower, mustard seed and innumerable medical plants. Their typical train of thought would run something similar to this: 'Where water can not enter ghee will; where ghee can not enter smoke will; where smoke can not enter mind will and where mind can not enter wisdom will'. As their wisdom was multifaceted often their expressions became esoteric. Especially in the case of Thirumoolar who is believed to have lived for three thousand years writing only one stanza a year (some kind of a writer's block!) the poetry became the site of high concentration of thought and wisdom. Devoid of emotions and folk tunes they became compilations of esoteric formulae.

Although excerpts from Thirumoolar and Sivavakkiar have reached the text books of Tamil literary studies major body of Siddhar poetry remains outside the academy. Diploma courses in Saiva Siddhantha accommodate Siddhar poetry despite the fact that certain portions of fanatical Saivite establishment tried to destroy Siddhar texts several centuries ago. Compared to the Saivite bhakti poetry that is always on the centre spread Siddhar poetry remains in the margins. Folk tunes, irreverence, esoteric composition, highly localised metaphors and anti-establishment statements that characterise Siddhar poetry have definitely contributed to their exclusion from the mainstream academy.

But Siddhar poetry is firmly ingrained in the consciousness of Tamil literary geniuses. Kumarakuruparar, Thayumanavar, Ramalinga vallalar and Subramaniya Bharathi identified themselves with the Siddhars and helped to provide continuity to the tradition. Although the mystical content of the original eighteen Siddhars was not matched by the followers of the tradition the continued presence of Siddhar figure in the Tamil landscape has triggered off complex attitudes, perspectives, world views and stances in the popular consciousness of Tamil villagers. Often beggars, quacks and dubious god men are referred to by the name of Siddhars and they soon assume the status of

religious gurus. Tamils maintain a great fascination with this freely wandering figure with long hair and beard. They accord a place of honour for the local Siddhar in the temples. The tales and myths that surround the unknown figures of Siddhars in the village temples claim often that the divine power of the temples depend on the Siddhar who chose to shrine himself. In a way religious practice and story telling are ways of writing the social history of these heroes.

The best of Siddhar poetry share their affinity with Sufi and Zen poetry of the world. Their knowledge of medicine is reconstructed and institutionalised in the Siddha medical colleges of Palani and Palayamkottai. The doctors trained in these colleges are engaged in government hospitals and private practices. To certain extent what we have saved is the Siddha medical knowledge on herbs, natural salts and metal ashes. What we have lost is their knowledge on the relationship between the cosmos and human body.

Creation of sacredness in Indian context often masks Indian capacity and tendency to archive and conserve cultural wealth. Tamil Jains preserved Siddha knowledge in the great dictionaries (nikandu) they produced. Tamil Buddhists contributed to the Siddha reflections on the infinite space, emptiness and inner psychic rhythm. Tamil Muslims refined the Siddha system of medicine in the texts of Unani.

Such confluence of traditions, religions and philosophies acts on the figure and expression of Siddhar is also a surprising revelation about what we normally consider simple people of humble origin. Siddhars as simple people had intimate relationship with nature and that gave them insights one could not even dream of in the modern life. For instance, one of the Siddhars Idaikadar was a shepherd. He predicted a famine twelve years in advance and started feeding himself and his goats with certain medicinal leaves. As only survivors of famine his fame grew and people flocked around him to learn his magic. He taught them medicine and poetry. One stanza for sample:

> Fly dragonfly fly to say all material is dream
>
> Fly dragonfly fly to say all material will perish
>
> Fly dragonfly fly to celebrate the body
>
> Fly dragonfly fly to say life juice of the body will never perish

Perhaps in the wandering lonely figure of Siddhar we can discover the qualities of being Eastern…

Thirumoolar

Verses from *Pattham Thirumurai*

Verse / 606

The sounds of the roaring sea, bell,
trumpeting of the elephant, flute
The sounds of the cloud, the droning of the beetle,
the dragon-fly, the conch,
The sounds of the kettle-drum and the lute
All these ten can't be felt except by the humble.

Verse / 209

Gone is life as the saree is torn.
The near ones became loveless.
No gifts; no loans; no celebration.
Their stride itself lacks the majesty of the city.

Verse / 229

The Brahmins who wished to listen to Vedanta
Didn't give up their desire even after listening to it.
Vedanta is the place where desire ends.
Those who listen to Vedanta are desireless.

Verse / 2104

One Race. One God.
Think of good and there is no death.
There is only one faith you can reach without shame.
Think of this to make your thought of God to survive.

Pattinathar

Verse / 23

Even the earth melts. Tree melts. Maya melts.
Delusion melts.
Women melts. Man melts. Discords melt.
Father melts. Mother melts. I too melt thinking of Guru,
the Lord.
These are words uttered by Him to me.

Verse / 39

Vile people of rude words, the despicable,
the ruffians, the lusty,
The senseless, they who commit only evil—
Why did you create people of this sort in this world like tall palmyras trees?
They are ignorant of the ethics of the good.
O, Lord of Kachchi!

Verse / 28

Verbal blemishes, faltering of thought,
The curses born of wicknedness, the evils of listening
to the utterances of unholy tracts—
Forgive all those faults! Lord of Kachchi!

Source: *Indian Literature,* No: 195, Jan-Feb, 2000. All poems are translated by A. Rajaram Brammarajan

What I wanted to avoid was an easy equation....

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Your book, *The Cult of Draupadi* is dedicated with a remark that 'in memory of my father who taught us to see'. This remark is quite intriguing and elucidation will help us to understand your concerns better

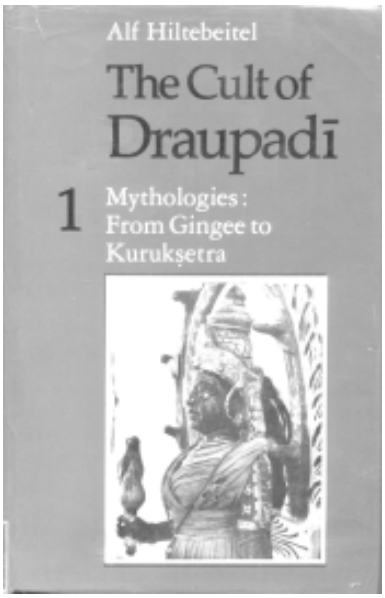
Well that remark is the last thing I expected to be reminded of. My father was a painter and in some ways I felt one of the best things that he did was always to enlist all of us in our family to appreciate the visual surroundings of our experience: not just artwork but stones, trees, nature and things like that. And also, even though I did not grow up in a very religious context it provided a sense in which I knew he had worked with stained glass windows and things like that – he'd made windows for churches in the States, and so I guess when I put that in the book I felt it was a little awkward but I meant to say something and I think what I felt then was about what it held in my own work, when I had moved from a great text, the Mahabharata, to looking at how that text was working in a cultural tradition where ritual and iconography and all kinds of gestures and everything else were really as much as anything the way the Mahabharata was being experienced and told. So as you say, it wasn't just a matter of words or words embedded in a whole variety of other modes of expression. There was one moment I remember when I was watching Arjuna and Draupadi being carried in procession at a Draupadi festival at Tindivanam, just out of the corner of my eye in my peripheral vision, and at that moment it was striking to me that they looked to me like they were Siva and Parvati. So you can see things that aren't really there, but you see behind them and for me that was a key to certain things at that point in understanding what was going on in Draupadi worship as I understood it. I think at one point I also mention not just my father but also about C. T. Rajan who was my interpreter. He was like my eyes to this world. I was not just seeing through my own eyes but I was seeing through cultural eyes that were not my own, and having a very good assistant and friend who helped me to see things as well. It was a visual experience and in a larger sense perhaps, as you say, seeing not just words, but a whole depth chart of different senses working together.

On Mahabharata as a visual landscape of time and as a text full of highly mediated and negotiated signs

Maybe it is almost the reverse because I think at a certain point I had to rethink, reenvision what I was understanding about the Mahabharata. It's a delicate issue because I don't think it simply can be a matter of reading backwards from say the Draupadi cult to a Sanskrit text. But as you say, there is a landscape there; a variety of different ways in which a whole cosmology is being envisioned in the Mahabharata, and if we're going to see that carefully – it is something that came to me very gradually – it is not the first thing that you can understand in the Mahabharata. It's carefully, almost disguised. The five landscapes are better suited to be stated as a theory, but in the Sanskrit epics there's a whole lot of description of mountains and places and phenomena of the stars and heavens and the ways that the whole world is coordinated in some way that the poet expresses through a kind of vision that's not merely a description of everyday experience. So you have to look at the Mahabharata with the 'Seeing Eye' as well.

***The Cult of Draupati* addresses Gingee's regional foot hold, its forgotten history and the relationship between the Cult's Gingee mythology and mythology of the Mahabharata. Does the Draupadi Cult incorporate dimensions of member of local cults? It also challenges many reflexive opposition in indological studies. What is that vigilance which is hidden from the reader?**

There is a lot going on in that book. If you're asking me what I've hidden, maybe I've hidden it from myself so I can't really regurgitate that up so easily. What I wanted to avoid was an easy equation. In some ways, what has made scholarship on folk epics in India and then on the classical epics in India very unproductive is scholarship that looks at the two together with the assumption that somehow they have to be adjusted to each other one way or the other. It's either that the folk epics are derivative or that the Sanskrit epic is really a derivative of earlier folk epics. So you have those two positions. And I think it has led people down a lot of blind alleys. Frankly I still see it whenever I read anything about it. So what I was trying to do was to complicate that relation by introducing a kind of disjunction, a kind of sense of rupture in that it's not really that the folk epics are derivative or that they are loose ends as some people describe them, but rather that the folk epic traditions that are martial and regional emerge in conditions where it is not the Sanskrit epics themselves that they would have known much of, and that what they would have known of them would have probably, if anything, been known not directly but only indirectly. What were already some kinds of tellings were on the ground and had already begun a career of their own that we can't really access too well, but can recover to some degree. I think we can recover them with a few interesting tricks, one of which is to look back at Rajput cultures as they were emerging in conjunction with Islamic partnerships. They were basically in an exchange situation of textual movement



back and forth with Afghan, Ismaili, and other Muslim traditions. It is in this context that during the mediaeval period that a Mahabharata and a Ramayana were beginning to be told in ways that cut across those communities, in regional settings where they established themselves, often tied in with land and kinship and little kingdoms and things like that. It's there that we can begin to see how a popular Mahabharata and a popular Ramayana were part of a world of shared differences. These regional oral epics provided a kind of text in which narratives of the past, state formations, and genealogies could find their places. All this was going on, that's why it's complicated. They were developing these traditions and ways to tie them to their own warrior traditions, especially martial traditions, Rajput traditions, and Islamic traditions. The Ismailis are part of this – that's the part that's really complicated about it – because they used these epics as a kind of metalanguage to convey Islam as well as a public language through which they told their versions of these stories. So it had something hidden about it itself. For me this was the last discovery, so I had to rewrite the whole book. So the book took shape around a series of interests. Sometimes they were discoveries and sometimes they were probably tortured attempts to put things together that really were less successful than they could have been - like in chapter three, where I tried to put together the Epic of Palnadu and the Annanmar Katai. I still think it was worthwhile, but by the end I was feeling that it had carried over only as one of the first things I had done to give the book some kind of beginning and momentum. Perhaps it would be the first thing to go if I were to start redoing it, because in some ways it's an overstatement. But then it helps to show some similarities, and that turned out to bear further development. But basically, it's the idea that there is a disjunction. You can't just move back and forth from the Mahabharata to these folk traditions. And the people who are doing that are just not doing their homework. They're just so different. It is just an attempt to diminish the one or the other. Both stand on their own and deserve to be looked at, but to do that you have to separate them. You have to just pull them apart to see some of the ways in which they deserve to be treated differently. For me, the Sanskrit epics - this is where I disagree with most of the people who are working from a folklore standpoint - to me, granted that there probably were stories of the Pandavas and *Rama* and so on before the Valmiki and Vyasa texts. But those are written texts; they are written masterpieces, and whatever went before them you can't recover. So that to work on what preceded them is to me a bit of a sleight of hand. You can simply say, 'well, essentially they were regional folklore or originally they were loose narratives and they sort of happened into place.' A lot of people think that way. They don't bother to explore what that really implies.

On tradition and singularity of epics as written texts different from other modes of representation

I think it's more problematic when it's a question of something that's been written. For something that's danced, it may come down to whether it's folk or classical. But with something that's classical and is written, then there are differences that I think are still worth tracing out. To me what can't be made insignificant is that the Sanskrit Mahabharata and the Sanskrit Ramayana are written texts and that's what establishes their classical authority. So that's what I'm working on. Working on that as being *sine qua non* in terms of understanding those texts and also understanding why they can't be so close to what's going on.

What are the key turning points in your research and fieldwork

Well, there are lots of them. They're of different types. The first thing for me was having worked on the Mahabharata for my dissertation while never having been to India. I was following in the footsteps of George Dumezil who was an Indo-Europeanist, a scholar of Indo-European mythology and so on, and I really had, through my first book, which was called *The Ritual of Battle*, developed a sort of unconscious way of thinking about the Mahabharata as if the Indian heroes, say Arjuna, was like Achilles, or kind of Homeric. My favoured frame of reference, despite myself, was Homer. And then I realised, having completed that book, that I must be wrong. I knew it couldn't be right, even though lots of people still do that. And maybe there is some level at which it is still useful. So that was where I decided to look at Indian traditions of the Mahabharata on the ground and in folkloric and regional contexts – whatever, I didn't know where I was going. And when I got here, I was in Poona, not Madras, and I started thinking I would either go up to Garhwal or I would go down to Tamil Nadu because that was where the Draupadi temples were. That much I knew. So I had plans to do both and I actually tried to do both. But in many ways, probably because it was easier, probably because it just caught hold of me, I started gravitating to Madras. I got a lot of good help and good direction in finding Draupadi temples around Tindivanam. And so that's where I really started seeing ways in which things could turn topsy-turvy in how I would see things. And then I thought what I would do after studying the Draupadi cult would be a kind of retrospective on the Mahabharata looking at it from the angle of the cult of the goddess. I've never really totally abandoned that project. But again I felt that there were too many intervening steps and that a simple equation wasn't going to be very illuminating. So I started thinking about ways in which it was necessary to not only look at Draupadi as a figure through whom the Mahabharata can be rethought, but ways in which that's not sufficient.

And there is where I took my real turns, around the disciplines that would be most useful to study the subject matter and content. My first discipline was history of religions and so I wanted to try to contextualise all this around subjects that had to do with Hinduism and religion. And then to get a grip for doing the work I did on the Draupadi cult, I tried to kind of pass myself off as an anthropologist. Christopher Fuller once said that I was a sort of honorary anthropologist, so I've to thank him for that. And then my next turn was to realise that to do the work for this book on medieval traditions that I'd have to really sharpen my eyes as a historian. I had to read a lot about medieval India. So I just dug in for two or three years and just read all I could about medieval India. And finally, what I've been doing most recently is, well not exactly most recently, but for the current book that I'm now publishing called *Rethinking the Mahabharata*, there I've recovered my interests in literature and in working with literary theory, thinking about ways of talking about the epic as literature. So those are some of the turns that I've taken in what has been a long twenty-five-year project.

On characterising the replications of the Mahabharata's whole story in the Draupadi Cult and the ways in which regional, martial and oral epics disjoin the classical epics and turn them inside out…

What was interesting was that instead of trying to find an equation or a metaphoric kind of overlap between these epic traditions and their regional developments as a transparency, where you can say this is what's being taken from that, and becomes replicated and re-institutes a world order - and these kind of things that are definitely being conceived and promoted in the classical epics, and surely also in the Draupadi cult as well with a whole village or set of communities essentially affirming a commitment to a restored world order during the festival - instead of that, what struck me as interesting and worth tackling in the oral epics book is these kind of metonymic strategies where things are being traced along into new sorts of contexts. Contexts especially where it's not so important to re-establish, to reassert, to reclaim, or to revitalise a Platonic order, an old or a pre-existent order, as it is to salvage something. To create something out of old, and new, bits and pieces. I think what's fascinating about these medieval epics is that they take bits and pieces from the classical epics, not directly but indirectly. Never the whole thing. It's not of interest to retell the whole of anything from the classical epics. The idea that there is something of value is retained, but really as a selective teasing out or selective pulling out of something that carries over to take on meaning in the new very vertical, very specific historical regional context which then gets to be a trace of that work. Something that gets carried forward in the local context. It then has a continued sense of being a piece of a larger whole but never with the sense that the larger whole is going to overlap. Going to Viramalai near Trichy, where the festival of the heroes is carried out for the heroes of the *Annanmar Katai*, it was fascinating to talk to people there. Brenda Beck had worked there earlier and found that this piece of the Mahabharata was commemorated here, or this piece of the epic was commemorated there. You could talk to the *pujari* or talk to the people who now knew the story and get different fragments: about two thirds of the total number of the fragments of the Mahabharata that Beck had found. But the important point was that, statistically, it wasn't any less. The premise was still an accurate premise that somehow, these pieces, these fragments, these metonymic tail-ends, are still part of what's being teased out to sustain something that's important at a local level. That's what fascinated me. That to me was of interest because it suggested something about the way that these epics were being used by communities. By people who were not interested so much in being accountable for the whole, but rather were interested in being accountable to traditions that were significant for their very local self-limitations. So that's what transparency means to me, in the sense of visions of the whole culture. The Mahabharata itself says that what's here is elsewhere and what's not here is nowhere else. So that's an image of totality like none other. That's not what interests people when the Mahabharata gets retold in its local regional versions. It's more something that has metonymic local strategic value that can be developed in relationship to other stories almost as if there is a kind of a partial overlap but never a complete overlap. That's one thing I found looking at the *Bhavishya Purana's* version of *Aalhaa*, the Hindustani oral epic. There you see the difference clearly. The Sanskrit pauranika author takes his story and tries to make it fit exactly into the Mahabharata. *Aalhaa* is completely Sanskritised: all the little microcosmics turn into macrocosmics. But in the oral versions, there you see hints of the bits and pieces that make partial connections rather than perfect fits. The Sanskrit Ramayana is even more obviously a text that envisions a perfect world order that lived again in *Pabuji*, the Rajasthani oral epic, but in little bits and pieces that are teased out rather than formative of a whole. So much so that a scholar like John D. Smith could say that such bits and pieces are irrelevant, something there only to 'legitimise' the oral epic, to lend it authority. The Sanskrit epics were looked at by most of these scholars, who did the research on oral epics, just as something to legitimise the local stories. And to me that's not getting very far in looking at how they're used.

On the context as a generative basis of your studies – South Indian folk traditions and pan-Indian classical structure of Sanskrit epics

Well, basically I don't think I differ much from what you said. I think if you describe the basic dynamic or rhythm as one where there is a generative possibility for multiple Mahabharatas working at local and regional levels and also having some relationship to a kind of sense of the Mahabharata as the pan-Indian story that has a Sanskrit form. Now it has to be noted of course that the Sanskrit Mahabharata has regional forms, that is to say that the Pune Critical Edition makes it evident that there is a northern recension and a southern recension, and variations related to the different scripts in which it was written down. There's still much more work that could be done by making use of regional variation even in the Sanskrit Mahabharata.

On the locus of the existence of multi-cultural and inter-lingual interpretations of the epics

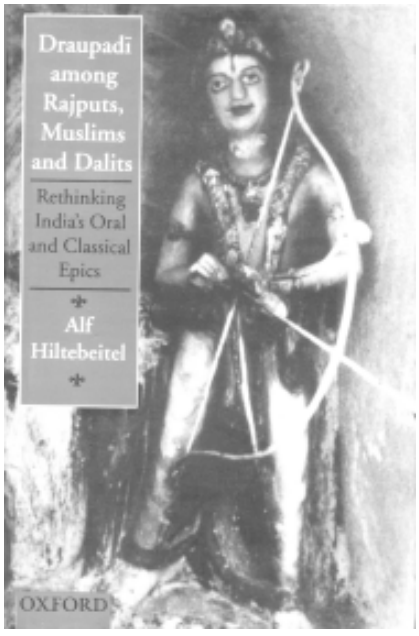
Well, to some extent I think it is in the nature of both epics to generate these possibilities. We can't really say whether they were motivated to have this effect or not, but the classical epics, whether in Sanskrit or in other languages, became the basis for envisioning a kind of totality – geographical, temporal – in South Asia and later in India that were not provided by any other text. The Rig Veda and the Upanishads don't tell us stories about India. So at a certain point, these texts became generative of ways of thinking about a totality – whether it is about a historical, geographical, or cosmological reality – that became definitive, not only for India but for what Sheldon Pollock calls the Sanskrit cosmopolis. The outcome is that it is something that can be reconfigured and almost by definition has to be reconfigured at every local level. That can be in the background and other things can supersede it in terms of importance – puranic stuff, bhakti movements, political change and so on and so forth. With the coming of Islamic culture and the British culture, the newcomers didn't necessarily require the Mahabharata to envision a time and space. But they had to negotiate something in relation to those texts. Akbar had Persian translations made of both texts. The British didn't know what to make of them. So the texts on that basis are generative. On the other side of it, you have different ways in which they can be given significance activated in local regional forms. They are very local or widely regional even, and there you can see a difference between the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. I've been thinking about this in relation to two books edited by Paula Richman. One is called *Many Ramayanas* and the other is called *Questioning Ramayanas*. She develops an oppositional binary: on the one hand, there are authoritative Ramayanas – Tulsi, Kamban, Valmiki; on the other, oppositional Ramayanas, which makes me wonder. We have Periyar's oppositional Ramayana, you have lots of others, but I don't know of an oppositional Mahabharata. I don't think it could generate that kind of response. You have Mahabaratas where the heroes become reincarnated, as in *Aalhaa*, to resist an empire. Ramayanas of opposition can be Ramayanas of resistance, but I don't think anybody really has told an oppositional Mahabharata – perhaps I'm wrong. Duryodhana could become the hero, but not to the same extent as Ravana.

On acts of purification and levels of variation in regional interpretations of epics

It's hard to know what to make of the Sanskrit epics as texts that define a quality of life because I don't know anybody who defines their quality of life by one of the Sanskrit epics. To some degree, we could hypothesise that the ways in which people think about these things could differ a lot. My hypothesis would be that you'd have to think about which characters, which figures, which episodes, which themes in these texts become normative or definitive or suggest role models. The selfless duty ideal that is there in the Gita or in Rama or Sita – these are norms, these are ideals in the Sanskrit epics, but if anybody ever lived them, they had a very strict kind of sense of morality, duty and obligation that defined life. When I see something like a drama portraying scenes from the Mahabharata in the Draupadi festivals, it's a very different Arjuna that would appear. He's not worried about the fine points of Krishna's dialogue, he's worried about how to get his wife back, or to get another one, or something like that. Or the abusive language that he not only hears from opponents like Karna, but dishes out himself. So, I think we could see very different lifestyles being generated, lived and given vitality. Both of the Sanskrit epics say that they present the *Sanadhana dharma*. That's the moment where that concept was first being generated and explored and given expression by those characters and in those texts. And that becomes one of the touchstones of defining how those texts define a certain normative vision of life. That's not particularly interesting to regional or local audiences in making the story significant.

On regional absorptions and appearance of unexpected characters in different socio- cultural contexts

It's interesting. I like the emphasis on how specific, unexpected characters are singled out and that's part of what I think is most fascinating. I noticed a Gandhari temple near Tirunelveli. There is an Abhimanyu temple in Dharmapuri and a Kunti Amman temple there. High up in the Garhwal Valley, you get Karna temples. I think it's interesting that what is being envisioned to some degree in all these different contexts is not just how this or that character becomes important for the local people, but that one of the settings that can be significant could be what this or that character saw in the Mahabharata. What the Mahabharata would have looked like in the perception of that person. The real figure for whom that's a touchstone is the pan-Indian figure of Barbarika, or Koothandavar, or Aravan, who is always the character who saw the Mahabharata war with his severed head. His folklore presents this recurring theme across Garhwal, Central India, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu. This is the one character who is famous above all for having seen the war fully, for seeing what really happened. And being very courageous, very brave as well. Something I'd like to work more on is not just that these characters are interesting from a local standpoint, but maybe about what it is they would have seen. What could be the story as seen through their eyes? If you could get that narrated, maybe there is a theme. There should be if there is a whole temple dedicated to that hero or heroine. The same for the text. My new book, *Rethinking the Mahabharata*, for instance, takes a look at the story from the standpoint of Vyasa...



Ao Nagas: Crafts and folklore

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Art and craft have always been a part of life among the tribes of Nagaland. One could see this relationship very clearly. Each tribe and village has its own tale of origin among the Ao Nagas. Each tribe has its own region. This is the geographical territory, which all Nagas abide by. Each Naga tribe is further divided into various clans. People belonging to different clans of the same tribe stay together in a village and also intermarry. But people belonging to one Naga tribe cannot stay in a village belonging to another Naga tribe. Naga tribes are spread from Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh in north to entire Nagaland and also in Northern Manipur in south. Each tribe has its own language too. Within Nagaland, fourteen different Naga languages are recognised. But there are more than twenty-four being spoken. To understand each other, within the state, a common language called Nagamese has been invented. This language is a combination of Hindi, Assameese and Naga dialects.

Nagas have been a warrior community. Protecting ones village from the attacks of outside enemies as well as from tribal wars and the traditional head hunting expeditions, had been a major concern. Hence all the Naga villages were always constructed on top of the hills. The houses are built on bamboo stills on the slope of the hills, on both side of the road. Unlike in plains, here the land is not flattened for building a house, but a flat bamboo platform for the flooring of the house is created by adjusting the sizes of various bamboos that support it on the slope of the hill. Creating a bamboo house like this is a live craft that is still practised in this area. These bamboo stills not only support the house but also keeps it dry from the water flowing on the slope of the hill during rainy season as well as from the wild animals and reptiles to a great extent.

Mokokchung district is the region of Ao Nagas. Ungma is the oldest and largest village of Ao Nagas. The village council members believe that their ancestors came to this village from across the mountain after two days of March. They halted at river Dikhu, made a cane bridge and came across with their families, animals and household goods, twenty-one centuries ago. All Ao Naga clans have once lived in this village. It is believed that in the beginning three major clans of Ao Nagas ascended from a stone. Tongpok the grandfather of Pongener clan, Longpok the grandfather of Longkumer clan and Langchakreb the grandfather of Jamir clan, are believed to have been first three Naga men from whom the entire Ao Naga race emerged.

The first Ao settlement took place at Aounglenden; now part of Ungma village. Aoung means jungle and lendan means plain. Therefore Aounglenden meant only jungle. Thus when all the three Ao clans came to this Aounglenden from different directions, the place was only a jungle. They cleared it, built a village and lived there. When ten mothers gave birth to ten boys on a same night, it was called Soyein. Soyein means increasing population. While staying at Soyein, once a tiger killed a priest. So the Aos left Soyein and went to Koridang, which became third Ao region. Later they came back to Ungma. Today all these three areas are part of Ungma village. Ungma village today is divided into ten khels (sectors), has a school, a dance society called Naga wadir and many weaving societies. Making cane and bamboo baskets for ones own use and building bamboo houses are the crafts carried out by men while weaving fabrics like shawls, skirts are the work of the women. Ao Nagas cultivate paddy, and their festivals and lifestyle revolves around this cultivation. Some slopes of Ao Naga Hills could be seen barren, as they are cleared to carry out *Jhoom* cultivation. Though there is a large growth of wild bananas on the hills, the banana fibres are not made use of.

Making goats hair accessories, such as daos, spears, etc. as well as pendants for the warriors and shawl end known as Sutsongrong, were other traditional crafts practised by Ao Naga men, apart from making cane and bamboo baskets. For this purpose goat's hair was traditionally dyed orange red using natural dye. For yellow, stem of dried orchid known as akong was used along with red dyed cane to make these products. Today, a few craftsmen still exist making these products as some of these products are still used.For example *Sutsongrong* is the end piece made using red dyed goats hair and a strip woven using red dyed cane and yellow orchid. This is still made by the craftsman of Longsa village. The main craft of women has been to weave traditional attire such as shawls, and loincloth for men, and skirts and shawls for women. Traditionally these were woven using natural dyed hand spun cotton, which was handspun and dyed by the women themselves. These were woven on the loin loom. Some villages specialised in spinning and dyeing cotton yarn. This was either sold as dyed cotton yarn or as the ready shawl, as per the order.

Today almost all the shawls are woven using ready dyed acrylic yarn available in very bright and at times gaudy colours. However, they try to keep the design same as the traditional ones and try to use colours closer to the

traditional ones. But as the yarn available is thicker and too bright, the result is not as intricate as in earlier traditional fabrics. Traditionally, each design had a norms attached, to who could wear which designs and products. For example, *Sutsongrong*, the end piece made of dyed goat's hair and cane, could be attached to the shawls of only head hunter, or a person who has done *methun* sacrifice, or the leader of the Panchayat. Each design also has a name. For example, the shawl having blue ground and black checks is named as keyisü meaning tiger shawl. It implies that the man who wears it is like a tiger. This is an Ao Naga shawl, worn by both men and women. Traditionally, this shawl was woven using cotton yarn, dyed blue using *Osak* (Strobilanthes flaceidifolius) plant. Apart from these, Mongkotep sü, the shawl having a white band of pictorial motifs of cock, methun, spears, elephants, tigers, stars, moon, human head, etc. woven in the centre of red and black stripped shawl is a warrior shawl. The headhunters and rich men who have sacrificed methun were only entitled to wear it.

Apart from these designs meant for the rich and brave, there were designs for different age groups and for different clans. For example, Ngamu sü, a skirt having black stripes woven on red ground was worn by old Ao Naga ladies. Changki sü, a skirt with red squares woven on a blue or brown background is a design of Changki clan of Ao Nagas, while Suka sü also known as imja sü is the skirt of Jamir clan of Ao Nagas. However, during my last trip I saw these restrictions have been relaxed to a great extent. Ao Naga ladies were wearing designs not only belonging to other clans of their tribes, but also of the other Naga tribes. Even the special shawls such as Mongkotep sü (the warrior shawl) was worn by many and are now sold in emporias for anyone to buy and wear. Nagas are all Christians, so during, before and after Christmas entire Nagaland has a big vacation. Apart from celebrating X'mas, Muastzü and Chungremong are the other two festivals celebrated by the entire community together. These two festivals, are related to agriculture. Muastzü originally used to be a six-day festival, but now it is celebrated only for three days on 1,2,3 May. Muastzü means blessing day. The festival is celebrated to worship god to bless all paddy and vegetable seeds so that a good crop may grow. This festival is celebrated while sowing seeds. Chungremong is celebrated at the harvesting time to bless the ready crop. It is celebrated from 1 – 3, August every year. The entire village gets together, dancing, singing, feasting and also a tug-off-war between men and women known as *Arü atsuba*, take place during these festivals. During dancing and celebrations, Ao Nagas wear their traditional costumes as well as special ornaments and garments of bravery, richness, etc. These are the occasions which still keep the tradition continuing, due to which the traditional crafts of preparing special ornaments and accessories made using natural dyed goat's hair, cane and special natural dyed shawls, skirts, etc. are surviving to some extent.

However, it is a totally a different world that one gets to see during such festivities. In daily life the youngsters have now adopted more to the urban and western attires. The elder ones also are now wearing mixed attire such as wearing a western blouse on a traditional skirt. Shawls as mentioned earlier are now largely woven using bright acrylic yarn and are used with lesser restrictions than earlier. Thus loin loom weaving craft has survived but craft of basketry and making cane and goat's hair accessories for their own use has reduced to a great extent due to the newer (more urban) lifestyle they have started adopting.

Moatsu Mong festival

Teyyam and our times

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Teyyam is a religion of the native people of North Kerala. The present socio-political situation of India especially in Kerala has considerable impact on the religions practice of Teyyam and the factors of vedic religion are getting prominence.

Teyyam is the sum total of the belief system, the mythology and religious factors regarding the local Gods and Goddesses. There are more than 300 Gods / Goddesses with their own mythology that narrates how a particular deity originated, its journey from place to place and how it got the right to have ritual performances in different shrines. How do the local God / Goddess affects the life of the people is the important part of the belief system. Mythology as well as belief system are latent in the minds of the people which are expressed through the ritual performances of the local God / Goddess.

Teyyam: A ritual associated with various local deities of Malabar region.

In Teyyam deification can be in three ways: 1) Victimised heroes 2) Incarnation of the great God 3) Gods / Goddesses disguised in another form (man or animal), reached earth and they get children. Their off-springs becomes Gods. According to the belief no one knows where the God / Goddess is. But as and when they are called in proper way they appear. Each God / Goddess has its own form with elaborate costumes and headgear. The performer does – make up accordingly and through proper ritual the God's / Goddess's power appears in the body of the performer and he behaves as the God / Goddess. Shrine of Devata is known as *kavu*. But the presence of Devata is not always there in the shrine. On the wooden stool inside the shrine a red cloth is spread and on that, the sword of the Devata is kept. Rarely Devatas appear through trees. The power of the deity is not known to anybody where it rests; but, finally it has to appear in the body of the performer and it has to leave after the performance.

The sakti of the Devata is transmitted into the body of the performer through a long ritual procedure. Through the observance of *vrutha* the body of the performer becomes sacred to accept the power. This observance may be for a short period to days together. The performer accepts *kodiyila* consisting of rice, betel leaves, arecanut and five little wicks through which some portion of the sakti of the Devata enters in to the body of the performer. Next ritual is *tottam* performance in which the performer in a simple dress recites tottam songs, the description of the history of the deity. *Varavili* is the first part of the verbal form of the *tottam*. In this he invites the deity to appear on the stool where the sacred sword is kept, to hear the praising songs and to be pleased. *Varavili* repeats two or three times. In between *tottam* songs are sung which is the elaborate description of the life history of the deity. At the end of tottam songs the sakti of the Devata possesses the performer. Tottam performance take place either in the evening or early in the night). By these acts the deity appears on the stool and little by little the sakti transfers in to the body of the performer by series of ritualistic acts.

Varavili repeats also at the beginning of the teyyam performance. The rice kept in front of the oil lamp is thrown to the deity and deity wears the headgear on the head another portion of the sakti of the Devata transfers to the body of the performer. During the performance the *veliccappad*, the oracle, hands over the sword of the *Bhagavati* to the performer after a long dance of the performer and the *veliccappad* face to face around the shrine. This is *Koodiyattam*. Handing over of the sacred sword is the moment that the transfer of the sakti completes. At this juncture the performer becomes deity.

At the end of the Teyyam performance some how the sakti has to go back to the Devata. Giving back the sword, removal of the headgear, throwing rice to the sacred stool inside the shrine by the performer are some of the acts, which set the performer free from the sakti. *Theyyampadi Kudikootuka* is the last ritual in a teyyam performance. All the performers stand in a line, face to face to the *komaram* (oracle) and throw rice and betel leaves to the *komaram*. Then the main performer asks the *komaram* 'whether you have accepted the whole of the power of the deity that we had incorporated in our body consciously or unconsciously, possessed or not, through these one, two or three days?' Then the Komaram has to answer 'Yes'. This shows that the power of the deity enters in to the body of the performer even without his knowledge and this act takes place gradually through several acts. From *komaram* it goes to the sword and then to the sacred stool and finally it

vanishes. The migration of the deity, the way it makes its presence felt, how it shows its fury and happiness etc. are unique.

The power of the deity is invited, it appears inside the shrine, gradually enters in to the body of the Teyyam performer through different mediums and through different ritual acts. In the same way it vanishes also. Contrary to this, the tantric system of worship in Hindu religion received and installed the power of the God / Goddess in the idol with a portion of the soul of the Tantri. Then it is tightened inside the idol with the help of mantra. Another ritual, *astabandhakalasa* is being done to tighten it in the eight sides. Hereafter the presence of the *Devata* is forever in the temple and devotees are able to worship it. The power of the *Devata* may diminish due to various reasons; getting damage to the idol, impurity and improper worship by poojaris. In that case different kinds of *Kalasas* are needed to restore the Sakti. *Kalasa* is a kind of ritual in Tantric worship. To sustain the power forever daily worship is also needed. So, the tantric way of worship and the belief system behind it is entirely different from Teyyam.

Now-a-days the Hindu religious belief systems are getting incorporated in to the system of 'Teyyam' at many levels. New myths are being created in support of the higher mythology or myths take a new turn by introducing higher Gods in the Teyyam myths. In the case of the Teyyam muthappan, apart from the existing local myth a new myth that the deity is the union of Siva and Vishnu is prevalent today. There are Five tiger devatas in Teyyam and about their origin there is a myth. The myth as part of the hinduisation got a new interpretation that they are Siva and Parvathy disguised in the form of the tiger and their children.

Gradually the belief system in Teyyam is changing and the tendency is more towards hinduisation. Installation of the devata in tantric system and inviting the god to appear and sending it back in Teyyam are parts of two different systems of worship and naturally they are in contrast. But surprisingly both these practices are part of Teyyam worship today more or less with equal importance. The native religion of North Kerala slowly undergoing the process of cultural osmosis with the impact of Hinduism as an organised religion. As a result Teyyam may assimilate in to the Hindu religion or Teyyam may take a new shape which is admissible to Hinduism also.

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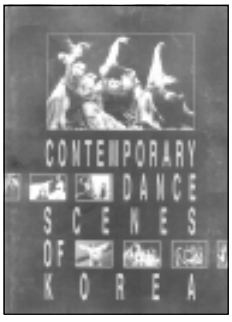

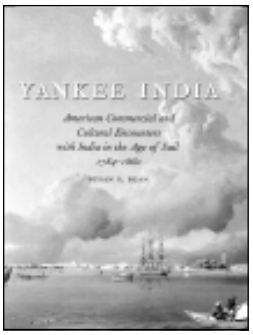

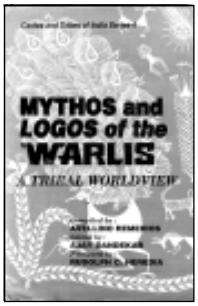

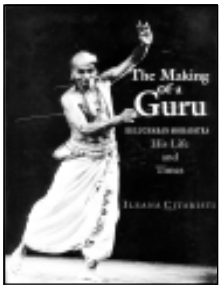

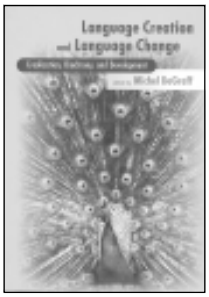

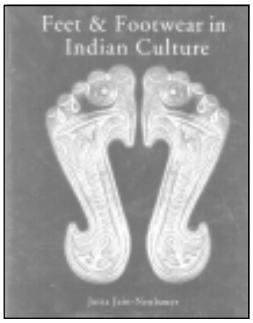

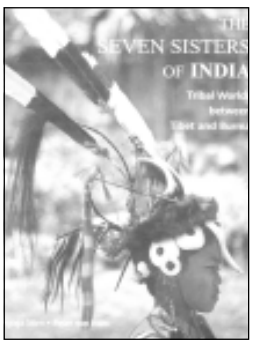

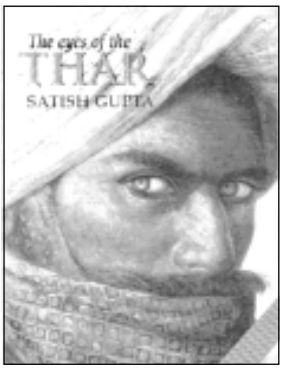

MaaRgamkaLi: Genre and group identity through the ages

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The Kerala Christian performance tradition presupposes the settlement of Christianity itself as a religious system followed by a distinct group of people who took it up as their faith. During the early period of the advent of Christianity, the new believers, in order to propagate and ensure the community's sustenance in the faith were prompted to 'Christianise' certain ritual performances connected with the rites of passage. Of all the rites of passages, the early Christian communities considered marriage celebrations as the most important component in their performance tradition.

Marriage being an important event not only to the family in which it is celebrated but also to the community itself, much of the community's progress and growth depended on matrimonial relations. Therefore the Christian community made it a point to make marriage celebration an important custom to reveal their identity as a group by performing certain songs which narrated their faith, dictums, and idioms in a didactic fashion. The native customs of the celebration of marriage is strategically manipulated to incorporate the Christian ideology in their performing traditions. The early Kerala Christian performed rituals by *paaTTu* tradition and in the course of enactments of *paaTTu* tradition, they also resorted to dancing during the celebrations. The earliest form of the dancing tradition involves circular movements while singing in gathering. Circular dance form reflects the organisational capability of the community on the one hand and the size of the community itself on the other. Usually when the community is small, it develops a mode of communication which is closed and akin to the community itself. The community members are capable of coding and decoding the messages sent through songs or verbal expressions. *PaLLippaaTTu*, *maaRgamkaLi*, *vaTTakaLi* were some of those performing traditions of the early Christian community. The *maaRgamkaLi* being very much semi-theatrical is the best example for the band level organisation of the early Christian community.

maaRgamkaLi is one of the ancient semi-theatrical round dance (group dance) forms of Kerala practised by Syrian Christians in general and *Knaanaaya* Christians in particular. This round dance form, beautifully moulds religion, history, culture, customs, faith and art together into one form. Traditionally *maaRgamkaLi* includes *vaTTakaLi* (group in circle or round dance) performed for a particular ballad called *maaRgamkaLippaaTTu* (*maaRgamkaLi* song) by men-folk. This text comprises fourteen padams (stanzas) which narrate the life and work of St. Thomas in Kerala. The etymological meaning of the term *maaRgamkaLi* itself suggests its historical antiquity and the Christian leanings. The literal translation of the word *maaRgams* is 'way' or 'path', *kaLi* means 'dance'. In the olden days conversion to Islam and Christianity was called *maaRgamkooTuka* or joining the way. Those who embraced a new faith were called *maaRgakkar* or *maaRgavasikaL* (converts) or in other words 'those who joined the new way'. This term was popular till recent times. But among Christians in Kerala, the word *maaRgam* got more in depth religious sense. The *paaTTu* tradition of St. Thomas Christians equates the word *maaRgam* with the religion of Christ, the way of Christ or those who practised Christian faith. In a way the early Kerala Christians who were in the way of Jesus Christ was known as St. Thomas Christians and the dance performed by them was called *maaRgamkaLi.* The song based on which this dance was performed was *maaRgamkaLippaaTTu*. It is difficult to fix the period of the origin of this dance form. There are a number of controversies regarding the authorship of the *paaTTukaL* and the legendary sources. Based on the linguistic analysis scholars always argue over the exact time period of its origin.

However, the present paper ascertains the fact the *maaRgamkaLi* is certain to have been in practice long before the advent of Portuguese in Kerala. Eventhough 'the difficulty of studying the early history of Christianity in Kerala is increased by the fact that such sources for the history of Christianity in the region down to the modern times were burned into ashes after the synod of Diamper in 1599. Therefore the Malabar Church has been left without authoritative documentation for the history of its ancient past. Our information concerning the early history of this Church must be derived from Syria and Green sources with authors who had no particular interest in India, and therefore, who provide us with only scattered and disconnected fragment of evidence'[3]. So in order to reconstruct the history of the past, one has to rely upon the references and early accounts of the Western writers. Perter Maffe's (1558) account on the popularity of songs and dances narrates the adventures of St. Thomas during the early days of Protuguese arrival. The reference made by a Jesuit priest Coria Amandar (1564) about the early Christian pilgrimage and procession to *Malyankara* on every November twenty-first, to commemorate the day of *Marthomas* arrival on the Kerala soil, with singing songs about Marthoma[4]. The documented evidence of the Gouvea's description about the dance form performed by a group of young men at Angamali in order to entertain Arch bishop Menezes and Gouvea's explanations regarding the salient features of the performance, like its beginning, with the performers drawing a cross sign on their forehead by

singing a prayer and the following song which narrates the episodes of the life of St. Thomas directly relate this with an early form of *maaRgamkaLi*. Moreover the decrees of Diamper (1599) which explicitly abandons some of the heathen practices of the then Christians and the participation in the non-Christian festivities, implicitly suggests the existence of an active performance tradition[5]. Apart from that the famous granite cross of the *Kaduthuruthy Valiapalli* (which was completed in 1594 AD) with a basement decorated with carved sculptures (at the left side, facing the church) resembling round dance forms such as *maaRgamkaLi* and *ParicamuttukaLi* indicates the existence of these forms in the pre-Diamper era.

On the other hand according to some of the veteran performers of this tradition, *maaRgamkaLi* was performed by those people who came to India with Thomas of Cana. This hypothesis could hold because the song *maaRgamkaLi* itself speaks for the existence of this art

Nandagovind

maaRgamkaLi

form among the people (in maaRgam). Especially the first stanza of the text itself indicates the immigration of the *Knaanaaya* Christians; their colonisation under the aegis of Thomas of *cana* and Bishop Joseph of *Ouraha* (Edassa) and their joyful wish is to hold together for ever. Another reason was the prominent existence of dance in various spheres of the life of the people in India. Moreover, the linguistic features, the structural affinities and the performance contexts of this art form clearly show the harmonious co-existence of the Hindu and Christian religions in the pre-Portuguese period as in the case of Kerala church architecture of the pre-Diamper era[6]. This mellifluous blend of native performance which affirms an antiquity and preserves all the varied elements of a rich cultural heritage proclaims the identity of the early Kerala Christians as 'Christians in religion, that too, apostolic in origin, oriental (Syrian) in liturgy, yet thoroughly Indian (Malayalee) in culture'.

The theme and the song text of *maaRgamkaLi* play an important role in understanding the significance of this semi-theatrical form. The source of the theme is based on the first, second and thirteenth acts of an apocryphal work called Acta Thomae written by Burdusan of Edessa Ouraha in the third century. Apart from this, Jacob Velliyan puts forward 'Homilies of Mr. Jacob', which include the writings of the Syrian scholar Mr. Jacob of Sergu in the sixth century as another work which might have influenced the contents, especially the seventh stanza of the present *maaRgamkaLippaaTTu*[7]. The text is based on St. Thomas, the great Apostle of Jesus Christ who is said to have come to India in 52 AD. In the text of *maaRgamkaLi* there is an elaborate description of his arrival, work, relation with the local people, difficulties and problems and finally his persecution and end have been incorporated in the fourteen stanza (*padams*) of the song. The song which begins with a *vaNtanageetam* or invocation, which refers to Marthoma and the *Mayilvaahanam* (rider on peacock) in the beginning ends up calling up on St. Thomas to come, help and bless. The later portion of the theme in a comprised manner is the dream of a beautiful mansion by *cooZan* (probably the Chola king of Mylapore) and the sending of his minister Avan, to bring in a master architect, later the bringing in of St. Thomas, the delight of the king on seeing a fine drawing by the apostle, the collection of innumerable materials for building, St. Thomas going away on Gospel work to Kerala and then to Malacca and China, imprisoning of the holy man on his return by the irate king, the ailment and apparent death of the heir (kings brother), his soul being taken by Angels to heaven where it beholds the fair mansion prepared for *ccoZan*, the soul's miraculous return to the flesh before cremation and the re-born brother telling the king of the good tidings, the conversion of the royal family and the rapid progress of Christianity with the multitude of followers, the lancing of the saint by the *Embrans* who are the priests of the temple and in the concluding stanza the angels are hastened into the scene, and they carry his holy spirit to the white throne of God and the body of *Chinna Mala*, (now called as Little Mount). The song throws light into the historical, geographical and socio-political life of the people of Kerala in those times.

The stanzas of *maaRgamkaLi* is in separate pieces of dance choreography. These fourteen stanzas are sung during the performance by mixing different kinds of *kaalasam*. The *kaalasams* suggest the end of a particular stanza. Like the other round dance traditions of Hindus, the *maaRgamkaLi* also have basic steps (*cuvaTu*). Moreover, the basic choreography is developed around the circle formation. The lamp in the centre is kept as the connecting point for all the dancers. They never show their back to the lamp, even at the leaping positions they do it facing the lamp. In the early days this round dance performance usually took place during the

celebrations of marriage and Church festivals. Mostly the venue of this performance was in the courtyard of the Chruch or in the *paNTal* of wedding party. In the centre of the performing place the traditional lamp (*nilaviLakku*) with twelve wicks were placed on a stool or a raised level. The *aasan* comes forward to light the lamp the stands by the side of the burning lamp. After this, each dancer comes forward, touches the flame and touches his own chest and forehead with the same hand. Then he goes down and touches the feet of the *aasan*. The *aasan* recites the lines and the disciples repeat the same in chorus. Then they start clapping the hands together and the different patterns of circular movements continue. Each piece of dance ends with *kaalasam* and at the end of the performance *mankaLam* comes, which is usually sung by standing in folded hands around the lit lamp. The whole performance involves devotional spirit.

This *maaRgamkaLi* performance structure has a religious interpretation. That is, in the performance there are only twelve performers denoting the twelve Apostles of Christ. The flame having twelve wicks also spells out the same idea. The *aasaan* is to be considered as the representative of Christ. The lamp lit in the centre is like a pivot holding the twelve together and the twelve performers dance in the circle drawing strength from Jesus, the lamp.

It is said that the lyrics originally might have been composed in Syriac and later translated into Malayalam. St. Thomas Christian's use of Syriac as their early liturgical language and the present existence of a number of Syriac liturgical words and the musical affinity of *maaRgamkaLippaaTTu* with the Syrian liturgical chanting strengthen the above point of view. But the early Christian's affinity and adaptability of the local culture and customs argue for the early composition of the text in the native language. Moreover the songs were written in Dravidian metrical scheme. As Jacob Velliyan opines, the music of *maaRgamkaLi* 'is basically in Dravidian tunes with a touch of syrian chants. The initial and concluding invocations for divine help also suggest its close resemblance to vedic chants'[8]. The dress used for the *maaRgamkaLi* is very simple. In olden days the men had only two white pieces of clothes on their body. (1) *muNTu* is a long piece of white cloth tied around the waist. They tie it in such away that inspite of vigorous and fast movements it remains as if it is a stitched costume, (2) *tooRttu* is a long white towel tied to their head.

The disparity between the present condition of this form and the early days leads one to assume three important phases in the history of *maaRgamkaLi*. The first phase was the pre-Diamper one in which this semi-theatrical form was performed by the St. Thomas Christians during special occasions. That time the sword and shield dance was a part of it. Later synod of Diamper curbed and suppressed this native form. During the last seventeenth century, due to the efforts of a Knaanaaya priest Itti Thomman Kathanar, the textual part of this form got certain upliftment and care. The *maaRgamkaLippaaTTu* might have been edited and refashioned into the present fourteen stanza structure during this time. However, till the fag end of the nineteenth century the art form was not very much in practice even though it did exist here and there. But at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of twenteenth century as the veteran *aasaans* assert, the form got popularity. Some of the structural changes took place then. Masters such as Kalarikal Unni *aasaan*, Indumoottil Kocheppu *aasaan*, Indumoottil Kutto *aasaan* were some of them who were responsible for this change and upheaval. By this time *puttan* Purikkal Uthuppu Lukose compiled and published *maaRgamkaLippaaTTukal* in 1910[9]. In this second phase the Knaanaaya Christian community acquired this form as their own tradition and heritage. Then again it had a set-back and during the 1950's to 1970's it was on the verge of becoming extinct. But in the late 70's once again the Knaanaaya Christians of Kottayam diocese took the initiative to revive and popularise this form. This third phase resulted in the form acquiring a place in the competitive section of the youth festival and in the cultural festivals as a mark of Thoma Christian identity.

During these phases the form has gone through certain major transformations. Some of them are: The shift of performance context from the marriage rituals to the competitive venues of the youth festivals, where the dance is performed on the stage by twelve women clad in traditional Christian costume, around a lit (*nilaviLakku*) for a stipulated time. The additions like the red waist belt and the use of sleeveless baniyans were added to the costume of male performers. The inclusion of *vanccippaTTu* music into the format of *maaRgamkaLippaaTTu* and the removal of *aasaan* from the centre are some of the major changes that occurred due to socio-political reasons. Thus, the present status shows a transformation and continuity.

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Kartabhaja: A minor mystic religious cult of Bengal

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In every folk society their beliefs and superstitions, behavioral approaches, social and religious ceremonies, creations like art – literature – performing arts etc., even kinship relations are to a great extent directed by religious doctrines. Moreover, many folkloric religious sects have emerged to follow only specific religious ideas and to observe certain worshipping processes. In Indo-Bengali context, existence of many such religious sects are found. Most of these minor religious sects arose in post–Chaitanya period along with the anti-Brahmin religious movement. Of them *Kartabhaja* deserves special mention. It is not only a religious sect, it also represents mass awakening of dialectical reality of that particular social context (Chattopadhyay, 1984).

The spiritual thoughts and social expressions of *Kartabhajas* are manifested in their religious fairs and festivals which take place in various places throughout Bengal. The biggest annual festival of this community takes place at Ghoshpara, the place which is associated with the holy memory of Aaul Chand, the founder of this religious sect. This place is situated at the southern end of Nadia district of West Bengal, adjacent to the river Ganga. This fair bears a rich heritage of more than two hundred years. Besides its religious significance to the people of a particular sect, it also has some attraction for the so-called higher society. Even it is said that once Rabindranath Tagore was curious about this fair and he gathered information from Nabin Chandra Sen, the famous poet of Bengal and the then sub-divisional magistrate of Ranaghat. Other than this fair many more fairs and festivals of *Kartabhaja* are held in various places in memory of Aaul Chand and his prominent disciples. All these festivals and rituals follow the auspicious occasions of the Bengali calendar year. The main objective of these occasions is to observe the religious significance and conduct of the *Kartabhaja* sect. Except the main stream of *Kartabhaja*, though there are some other minor modified forms like *Gupta Kartabhaja*, *Satyasrot* etc. are found, mostly all of them are the followers of Aaul Chand (Nandi, 1984). It is believed by the *Kartabhajas* that Aaul Chand was actually another form of SriChaitanya after his re-birth. The followers of this *sahajiya* cult, a stream of the *Kartabhajas* take SriChaitanya as their supreme guru and they also believe that there is a close relation between *Kartabhaja* and *sahajiya* cult. At folk level it is possible to get assimilation of the philosophical thoughts and ritualistic performances of folk religion and shastric religion. Perhaps it happens due to the circulation and diffusion of different cultural traits. In Bengal also we find many such examples of contacts, conflicts and assimilation of folk and higher religions.

Thousands of *Kartabhaja* devotees meet together at Ghoshpara, on the fullmoon day of Holi. They think of it as if to come to their real home and their own house seems to them as *basa*, the temporary residence. Many devotees from different parts of Bengal and even from the neighbouring country Bangladesh come here every year to meet their *gurus* and to pay homage to the *Satimata. Satimata* is the wife of Ramsharan Paul, who was one of the twenty two major disciples (*Baish Fakir*) of Aaul Chand. Ghoshpara is famous for *Satimata devi*, as it is believed that by her supernatural divine power desires of the devotees can be fulfilled. Even they have the trust that her divine powers can cure the blind, the deaf and the dumb. To reveal the real situation we will have to search into the socio-economic background of these credulous devotees, mostly those who are living below poverty level. Their social and family situation compel them to believe in this supernatural power, as they have no much scope and sufficient money to avail of the costly modern medical facilities. So, it is often found that they try to make their beloveds cured by dipping in the black mud of holy lake Himsagar. This job is done by the religious *gurus*. Sometimes it is found that these spiritual men cover the eye of a blind or smear the tongue of a dumb with this mud of Himsagar in a very inhuman process. Indeed devotees have full confidence on them. Here, a pomegranate tree is another important holy spot. The belief about divine grace of this tree has come down from the long past. At the foot of the pomegranate tree a handful of dust suffices to cure any disease and cleanse from any sin (Hunter, 1875).

Devotees come here to take vow for fulfillment of their desires and they fasten a piece of stone or derivative objects like small terracotta horse or elephant to the tree with a red thread. After fulfillment of their particular desire again they come here to keep their promise and offer their worship to *Satimata*. Because this fair is thought to have the divine power of *Satimata*, it is popularly known as *Satimata's fair*. In the ritualistic part of this fair many forms of human sacrifices are found. Devotees make prostrations from Himsagar to Dalimtala, the process is termed as *dandi kata*. After taking holy dip at Himsagar they lay horizontally on the ground. At that time they ignore their physical sufferings caused by gluey muddy ground and heavy crowd. Sometimes even small children 3-4 years old make prostrations to keep their parents rows. In this fair each guru establishes his shrine centred around a tree. These are called *aasan*, while larger ones are called *aakhda*. In these religious camps gurus remain always

surrounded by their disciples and at the time of Holi they assemble here to discuss about their theological pantheon, religious rituals, esoteric words etc. besides its sacred parts some profane parts also found in this fair, which provide various entertaining elements.

Like Ghoshpara fair *Kartabhajas* also perform annual festivals at Kanchrapara, Chakdah and some other adjuscent places. Like *Baul*, another mystic cult of Bengal, *Kartabhaja* also follow obscure religious practices. They believe in body worship. For *nirvana* or attainment of salvation they indicate a certain state of realisation, which one can reach by the union of male and female power. According to them, this certain state of supreme bliss is called as 'Maha Sukha' (Dasgupta, 1946). In this stage through the sexual activities they get over the sexual feelings and ultimately realise the supreme spirit into their own. Again in this stage of platonic body worship the man and woman both should transform themselves into the opposite sex and their realisation should also become like this. In one of their popular religious song *Bhaver Geet* it is described that *when woman becomes hermaphrodite and man becomes eunuch, they are considered as the real Kartabhaja.* This certain stage of body worship is called *death in life* (*Jyante Mada*) (Nandi, 1984). In their spiritualism and religious practices body is the most holy and an important element. In some other obscure religious cults also we find similar ideas. Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta, clearly illustrates one shloka (verse) of *Dohakosa* in which the body is described as the greatest pilgrimage:– 'Here (within this body) is the Ganges and the Jamuna, here the 'Ganga Sagar' (the mouth of the Ganges), here are Prayaga and Benaras, – here the sun and the moon. Here are the sacred places, here the Pithas the Upa-Pithas – I have not seen a place of pilgrimage and an abode of bliss like my body'. Dasgupta, 1946). All these rivers, sun, moon, *pithas* and *upa-pithas* are used symbolically. A real votary of *kartabhaja* has good control over his own body. He can control his respiratory wind, glandular secretion and even nervous. Thus *Kartabhaja* worshipper realises supreme god by controlling his sense organs.

Common people failed to realise divine spirit because of the complex religious systems. As a result people became attracted to the simple worship system of these anti-vedic religious sects. To them 'man of heart' is more acceptable than imaginary vedic gods or Upanishadic *Brahma*. A *Kartabhaja* worshipper practices and learns this obscure worshipping process from his / her guru to meet this divine spirit. It is true indeed that the spiritual thoughts and exalted religious processes of *Kartabhaja* contribute a rich cultural tradition in the cultural heritage of India.

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Religion and folklife

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Most traditional societies, which include folk/ tribal societies, live within a framework, which may be described, as embodying a grammar or a vision of life. Their religion is a central part of this grammar. It is religion that, in however oblique and complicatedly symbolic way, presents the picture of a world which organically relates man, society, nature and what may be called the sacred.

There are countless legends in NorthEast India describing the natural forces embodying a divinity which they share with human beings, plants and animals. There are sacred gods, sacred forests, rivers, mountains and animals. A community having a religion of its own, with its deities and its rituals is not only marked off from the neighbouring tribes, it also derives a sense of dignity and self-respect.

The Deori, tribe in Assam, continues to worship Gira Girachi in their namghar in spite of the impact of organised religion and modernisation. They worship other deities called *Balia Baba* and *Pisasi Dema*. Their pujas are performed on the basis of the tradition and they celebrate the festivals of bohagiyo bisu and Magia Bisu regularly. So also the *Nishis* who worship *Ane Duini*, the sun-mother, the *Tagins* who have their own *Diani-Pol* or the Sun- Moon God.

The two most powerful deities for the Apatanis are, *Kiru* and *Kilo*, whom they worship and with whom their annual festival, the *Mloko*, is associated. For the Hill Miris Si-Donyi the sun and the earth are the highest deities. *Si* lives on this earth and *Donyi* lives in the sky. Their religion, was their source of strength and, more importantly, it helped to preserve the ecological balance of the region. In this connection, it may be noted, that for the *Adis* the natural forces are the manifestation of the supreme power of *Sedi*. Even others like the trees, stones etc. come on their own, grow by themselves and become what they are also by themselves.

Historians such as Mackenzie, Harakanta Barua and S. K. Bhayun, describe the *Adis* as a dignified and self-contained people who lived with the truths of their own religion, songs and dances and had their own village council of elders namely Kebangs, to guide them advise in political, economic and agricultural matters. What is unique about the *Adi* conception of the creator is their belief that He becomes perceptible through the Sun (*Donyi*) and the Moon (*Polo*). Actually all natural phenomena, whether in the cooling effect of the Moon, or in the revealing nature of the Sun reflect the Supreme reality. The religion of *Donyi-Polo* stands for the pursuit of truth which, they persist in claiming, pervades all things. For example a reference to an oath taken at the beginning of the Kebang, meeting of the elders is: *Sun-Mother, Moon-Father / if I have committed any crime / theft or any other crime / if I have drunk anything forbidden / this day's rising Sun / you, this eve's setting moon, you / in a manner / that all can see and know / clearly testify.*

This simple prayer of the *Adis* reminds them that the beneficial force is always there. What is significant here is the implied emphasis on the intimation of beauty and splendour that the worshipper gets through his contact with nature.

Like in other tribes of NorthEast India, the sacred here is identified with their own geographical setting and their traditional way of coming to terms with it. This inevitably enters into their sense of identity. This world-view is still closely wrapped around their ecology. The Adi since ancient times has given a sense and meaning to all that surrounds him and his day to day life has come to be intimately connected with that meaning. Hence it is not easy to divorce the supernatural from the natural elements in this religion. It may be noted that there was hardly any practice of paying for the upkeep of a religious 'clergy' who served the *religious* needs of the people by performing rites directed purely towards other worldly ends.

Along with its function of uniting and consolidating the group Adi religion has, like most other tribal religions, a necessary reference to the environment as sacred. As long as their environment remains cohesive and their very own, their religion and consequently their identity remains intact.

Krishna and Radha Drawing by a sutradhar of Burdwan, late 19th century or early 20th century, West Bengal

Lai haroba: Festival of the gods

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Lai-Haraoba is a Manipuri festival, and is associated with the Meiteis, an ethnic and majority community of Manipur.The Meiteis largely inhabit the valley of Manipur and they comprise roughly two-thirds of the state's population. The Meiteis are distinguished from the Naga, Kuki and other tribes, which are classified as 'scheduled tribes' by the Indian constitution, in both language and in cultural development.

From mid-February to June each year, the plains of the valley of Manipur reverberate with the sound of music, drums and the pena, (a traditional Manipuri musical instrument) and we see groups of people, old, young and children, dancing and celebrating some profound beliefs in their lives. These celebrations are termed as Lai-Haraoba. Lai means deity or ancestor and Haraoba is an act of being pleased. Lai-Haraoba which, may be translated as the pleasing of the gods-represents the heart of Meitei culture. The essence of the Lai-Haraoba is to call up the gods and to please them through rituals in order to gain their favour. The songs of the Lai-Haraoba have lyrics, which are very poetic. The dances and music indicate high aesthetic awareness and sensitivity, and the totality of the experience gives us a pre-Hindu view of the world. The pre-Hindu civilisations of the Meiteis have been preserved in the Lai-Haraoba. The Lai-Haraoba is an act of worship. It is a religious event, which can only be understood in terms of the Meitei experience or view of the Lais, the deities, as the ultimate reality.

A Lai-haroba sequence

The main rituals of the Lai-Haraoba are performed or led by the Maiba (priest), Maibi (priestess) and penakhongba (the player of the pena). The Maibis and the Maibas are the traditional priestesses and priests of the old Meitei religion.The Lai-Haraoba is also interpreted as an ancestor worshipping festival of the Meiteis of Manipur. Normally the rites of the Lai-Haraoba are performed during summer. The people celebrate the festival for odd number days, say five, seven nine, eleven days etc. Four distinct features of the Lai-Haraoba have emerged at different geographical areas, namely, Kanglei (at Imphal), Moirang (the Moirang community near Loktak lake), the Chakpa (at Phayeng, Andro and Sekmai of the traditional Loi community), and at Kakching (a centre of an ancient Loi community; now the granary of Manipur). Each Haraoba have distinct rites and rituals, though the spirit and the philosophy is the same. Some Lai-Haraobas are also celebrated during winter.

The structure of the Lai-Haraoba consists of the vast repertoire of songs, dances and music, which enshrines the heart of the people, and reveals their aesthetic development. Normally, the Lai-Haraoba consists of three core rituals. The first is the drawing up of the spirit of the Lai from the water, which is also ceremonially taken in procession to the shrine. From the second day onwards, there is a major celebration at the courtyard in front of the shrine, of the birth of the Lai and subsequent development of the Lai's relationship with the natural world and civilisation. There are rites to celebrate creation, dances and symbols depicting activities like construction of houses, cultivation of cotton plants and spread of the energy of nature where men and deities interact for the benefit of the world and the universe. Many rituals are added during these celebrations and offerings are made of flowers and fruits. At certain points, the maibi becomes possessed and delivers oracles. Finally on the last day, the spirits of the Lais are ushered into heaven, after the last core ritual is performed, which extracts an oath of understanding from the Lais, who promise to give benefits to their children, to the people left in the mundane world. The Lai-Haraoba is a huge fertility rite with sexual symbols and imagery freely and subtly utilised which effect food production, procreation and longevity for the community. There are rituals for human and agricultural fertility, welfare and protection. The celebrations are held mainly in the agricultural season when the earth symbolised as the mother is ready to receive rains from the sky, symbolised as the father.

At the end of the Lai-Haraoba, communal and sporting activities are held. The Lai-Haraoba not only reflects the entire culture of the Manipuri people but also preserves it. Young people are given an opportunity to learn dances for performing in the Lai-Haraoba to carry on the rich tradition of the Meiteis. There are also formal institutions for imparting such knowledge. The myriad rituals performed by the maibas and the maibis are minute and complex; and the totality of the ingredients makes the celebration the finest manifestation of Manipuri civilisation. The Lai-Haraoba brings together oral tradition, prayers poems, dances and music into a beautiful folk-ritual, which epitomises the unique culture of the Meiteis.

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Kahani performances – women as saints, believers and performers

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Performing Kahanis is a colloquial expression used by the women in the Muslim community to refer to folktale type ritual narratives. These narratives are about women saints, their miracles and sometimes about their life histories. This particular genre constitutes a major and vital part of women's folk religious expression. This is known to be widespread in Rayalseema, Telungana and Coastal Andhra (the three major regions of the State of Andhra Pradesh) and also in the other Indian states like Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. The women perform these *kahanis* in Urdu, the language spoken by the community as a whole. The *kahanis* are predominantly in oral tradition but they are also available in the form of chapbooks which are still in use. The women perform these *kahanis* at gatherings in a neighbourhood house or in their own houses. It is usually performed on Fridays, either for the fulfillment of a vow or the well-being of the family or for specific problems in the family like an illness, a difficult labour, a delay in marriage or for education, job etc. It all varies depending upon the habitual nature of the people and the places.

The whole expressive culture in and around this genre is too large and widespread to know all and it varies in ways-as many as the number of groups. It is a traditional practice among women's groups to carry it forward in a chain from grandmothers to mothers and daughters. Regarding the number of *kahanis* opinion varies. Some say that there are many but some others feel that there could be only twelve to fifteen *kahanis*. Each *kahani* bears the name of a woman saint whom they refer to as *Bibis* (holy women) These *bibis* are either historically well known people like Bibi Fatima (Prophet Mohaddad's daughter and Hazrat Ali's wife) and Rabra Basri (717-801 AD), a sufi mystic or unknown saints like Bibiyon and others. Some of these saints are venerated in *darghas* and shrines which are also sites of great significance for women's folk religious culture. Women observe regular duties like *Namaz* and perform these *kahanis* in the afternoons. These *kahanis* should not be *told* other than in that particular setting. Usually an *Ustadbi* (a traditional teacher) or an elderly woman is invited to *tell or read*, thus lead the *kahani* performances for a nominal fee. Any woman can perform these *kahanis*, if she so wishes by inviting other women. There are prescribed ways for performing with certain rules laid down like the *fatheha* (food offering) at the end of it. A *kahani* should not be *told* without a *listener* and there should be atleast two persons one to *tell* and the other to *listen*. Even in the case of reading be another listener is required. They start each *kahani* with the utterance of the words *bis'm-illa h-ir-rahma 'n-ir-ahim* (In the name of the most merciful, most bountiful God.) In the first sentence of the kahani the starting phrase would be sometimes once in the region of prophet Mohammed…….'. The *kahanis* end with the phrase *khuda Ki Khudrat se* (with the grace of God), or *Khuda ki shukar ada karke* (thinking of the God for his grace). The following is the text of Bibi Segat ki Kahani – one of the most widespread Kahanis: - A king and a queen, with the blessings of a Faquir, got a daughter and named her Bibi Segat, she grew up and led a pious life. When she was asked to get married, she refused saying that marriage is wrought with hardships. When her mother persuaded her to agree she disappeared in a closed room. She appeared in her 'mother's dream', consoled her and told her to propogate her story by telling others in the world. She also told her that whoever performed her *Kahani* by *telling and listening*, their wishes would be fulfilled. Later in the story and in the subsequent incidents, it is reiterated that whoever *listens* and *tells* is benefited and those who don't, suffer loss-either loss of belongings like wealth and kingdoms or dear ones like family members and thus, face hardships. Even for the king in the story, a woman had to perform this on his behalf to regain his lost position. As is evident in the above narrative, these *Kahanis* are women-centred, in the sense, women are in lead and play active roles as saints, believers and performers. We see the same, outside, of the *Kahani*, women in active and lead roles. These roles provide an advantageous side to a disadvantageous position in a segregated society. We see, in these performances, women's major role, in multiple ways, as against their marginal public participatory roles in general *official* religious culture.

What is missing, in the exclusion of their participation in the public, religious activities, is their identity-the first and foremost urge for an active share of the 'self' in the process of spiritual expression pertaining to the mundane life-with its immediate needs and an after life connected through this life. Another dimension that unwinds itself is gender identity-a closer one with the woman saint as a guidance, a support, a consolation in difficult times, to empower themselves to seek strength. While *dargahs* provide women a compensation for lack of a place of worship in public, *Kahani* performances provide a bridge at home, an extended woman saint's presence back home. While *belief* is central to their practise, they rebuild it with their renewed strength and prove that their belief is *scientific* because it is tried and tested with satisfied results for them. The texts of the *Kahani* establish and re-establish a faith in the veneration of women saint's in the first place and women's roles as believers and performers simultaneously. The strength of a bond in *groups* – with minimum to maximum size – and the *artistic*

communication – of narrative form both can be seen with a different but strong purpose or Dan-Ben-Amos's classic definition (1972). Women's culture in and around these Kahani performances shows their greatest strength in a single genre with diversity. Within the traditional means, they extended their freedom to choose and follow their choice of religious expression besides the prescribed choice. The blend they achieved lies in the way they turned the contradictory into complementary.

References

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Announcement

Indian Folklore Resource Book: Scholars and Engagements-Vols. 1900 – 1930, 1930 – 1960, 1960 – 2000.

National Folklore Support Centre proposes to publish two volumes of resource books on Indian scholars who have made significant contributions to the field of folklore in the twentieth century. As the discipline of folklore grew in India as an offshoot of regional languages study we seem to have different perspectives and engagements existing in different states at any given historical period. A compendium that offers a comparative perspective on the eminence of folklore scholarship in different Indian states would enhance possibility of dialogue within this nation.

These books with their accessible presentation are also conceived of as an exciting new series of cutting edge research and studies for wider readership across the most topical areas of Indian folklife and folklore. One of the key aims of the series will be to focus on the interaction of the theory and practice, exploring the application of international research to assess the seminal contributions of Indian folklore scholarship, and the scholars who have creatively and singularly helped to define the practice of Indian folklore for the twentieth century. Uniquely drawing together within one single cluster of titles, this high profile series, we hope, will offer an important contribution to our present day scholarship.

This project is conceived as a new venture in bringing together contemporary writers of different discursive fields and folklore to produce collective work. The book will attempt to find fascinating indices of our changing attitudes to folklore and folklife, the extended and multi-disciplinary approach to tradition, history and development of Indian folkloristics. Posing challenging questions, the distinguished contributors need to critically acknowledge, and throw light on the profiles of Indian folklore scholarship during the period 1900-2000. The books need to provide the following:

—— Biographical sketch of scholar(s) worked in vernacular languages

—— His / her seminal contribution to the discipline of folklore, innovation and development of his / her ideas

—— Bibliography / discography of his / her published and unpublished works and works on him / her by other scholars

—— Situating his / her work historically, chronologically and in relation to other works of that period and Scholars perception about multiple existence and variation of Folklife and Folklore and the dynamics of cultural mediation of that time

—— Translation of his / her representative work into English with critical reflections on the newness of his / her ideas

—— Concise historical introduction of folklore scholarship of that region / language

—— Maximum length of each study should not exceed ten thousand words

These volumes are considered as easy-to-use sourcebooks and the format need to be accessible to specialist as well as non-specialist readers. Reinterpreting seminal regional ontology, variously reporting and situating their work, the sourcebooks attempt to provide an illuminating perspective on a richly varied selection of Indian folklore scholars of the last century.

We are looking for regional compilers and editors who would work with regional scholars to produce these seminally important volumes. Scholars interested in this exciting publication venture are requested to contact Director, NFSC or Program Officer (publications) at the earliest as the project is set to commence by July 2001 and the books are to be printed by December 2001.

Art and culture

Naga Cultural Attires and Musical Instruments edited by Kajen Mongro, A. Lanunungsang Ao, New Delhi: Concept, Pp. 132, 1999, ISBN 81-7022-793-3

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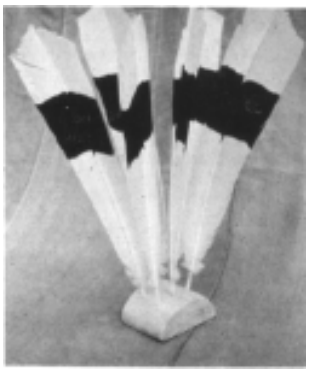
Naga Cultural Attires and Musical Instruments is an attempt to present the traditional costumes and ornaments and the musical instruments used by the Nagas of North East India. It has been written by Kajen Mongro, a school teacher-turned-cultural officer with the Nagaland state government. But though he wrote the material for the book, he did not live to see its publication—it has been compiled and edited by A. Lanunungsang Ao, the head of the Department of Sociology in Nagaland University. It has three sections, the first of which deals with the attire of Naga men. The second section deals with women's clothing and the third section with the different Naga musical instruments. The Nagas are a colourful people who inhabit the forests and hills of the Nagaland. The term *Naga* is generic and used to refer to any of the different Naga tribes like Ao, Angami, Lotha, Sema, Mao, Phom and Thangkhul. All Nagas rely heavily on the forest for their subsistence—they are shifting cultivators who practice *jhum* cultivation. Each tribe has its own dialect and speech, and this diversity has given rise to a variety of beliefs and cultural practices. Nevertheless, the Naga tribes share the same cultural ethos and that seems to make them stand out as a distinct cultural group—whatever the differences between the Naga tribes may be, they present themselves as belonging to a Naga culture.

The book starts off with the section on men's attire. The author starts with the head, and describes each item of clothing and ornamentation in great detail. He also gives an account of how a particular item is made and its ritual and ceremonial significance. He starts with the hornbill feather, which is worn on the head, and proceeds with the descriptions one by one to the leggings. He describes nineteen items in this section, ranging from clothes to ornaments and implements of war, like spears and shields.

Of special significance is the *shibu*, or Boar Tusk necklace. This is used extensively by different Naga tribes. While the Konyak, Chang, Phom and Yimchgunger use it occasionally as a necklace, the Ao and the Sema use it regularly. A few other tribes use boar tusks as part of their headgear. The making of the *shibu* begins with the hunting of the boar. This is usually done by using traps at the watering holes of the wild boar. Another method of hunting is to track a family of wild boar and then digging pits around it. The bottoms of the pits are covered with sharp spikes. Then the pits are covered with leaves and sticks. When the wild boars stumble into the pits, they are injured and easily hunted. After the boar is hunted and the meat shared among the hunters, the leader of the hunt gets the boar tusks. There are two varieties of *shibu*—the *ajapa*, a two-tusk necklace and the *shipureb*—a four-tusk necklace. Both these are made using thread, wood, cane, red cane, conch shell pieces and red beads along with the tusks. The tusks are held together by a piece of wood and plaited red cane. The conch shell pieces and red beads make attractive adornments to the necklace. Once the necklace is made, it has to be sanctified by the *arasentsur*—the shaman. Only a properly sanctified necklace is worn. Of the two types of necklaces, the two-tusk necklace is worn by all, while only warriors who are skilled in warfare wear the four-tusk necklace. The warriors wear the necklace during dances and festival times. Another elaborate item of adornment for men is the head plate, which is worn only by those who have taken at least one head in battle. Headhunting has long been a source of great pride for Naga warriors. The head plate marks out those warriors who have been successful in their quest for heads. This elaborate head dress is held on the warriors head and shoulders by an ingenious device called the tying string. This is a piece of string made using cotton and woollen fibres. It is made in such a way that it is strong enough to keep the head dress in place and at the same time, soft enough so that it does not cause any discomfort. This passes beneath the wearer's chin and behind the back of his neck, holding the heavy and elaborate head plate in place.

A very important component of the Naga man's possessions is the shield. The Naga shields are made either of bamboo or leather. The bamboo shields have a framework of strong bamboo and are covered with a smooth layer of woven



bamboo. The leather shields are made from the dried hides of the *mithun* buffalo. Both shields have an h-shaped handle and a shoulder string and cover the body fully, from the neck to the knees. While the bamboo shields, which are lighter and stronger are preferred for battle, the heavier leather shields are used for dances, as it is easy to draw designs on them. The production of both shields entails a set of strict laws. A period of *kimo*, ritual purity, is maintained for seven days before the making of a shield. During the *kimo*, no one in the house of the maker of the shield should eat in another's house; the maker of the shield shall abstain from sex; neither the maker nor his family members may visit a house where a death has taken place; the maker's children should keep away from the village dormitory. After the seven-day *kimo*, the maker goes to collect materials for the shield. After the shield is made, the shaman examines it for signs of any knots or bits that have not been smoothened properly. If no such thing is found, he sanctifies it and the shield is ready for use. If, however, the shaman finds a knot or a rough spot on it, the maker pays a small wage of some rice or salt to a man to throw away the shield in the graveyard. Any rough spot or knot in a shield is believed to shorten the life span of the user.

The shields are classified into three based on their use. War shields are used by warriors in battle. The smooth bamboo surface of the shield is made wet with water by the warriors just before a battle—this makes the front slippery and the weapon of an opponent will skid off the surface. After a battle, the shield is sanctified by the shaman. When it is not used, the shield is hung above the fireplace in the Naga home—the soot form the fire strengthens it. The Tiger shield is used while hunting a tiger. Sometimes, when a tiger came into the village and troubled the people, the Naga warriors would track it into the jungle. Once they spotted its lair, they would build an *akuchi*—a strong wooden and bamboo fence around it. Then they would enter the *akuchi*, the tiger shield in one hand and a spear or *dao* (traditional Naga knife) in the other. Thus they would hunt and kill the tiger. The Dance shield is used only on festive occasions when the warriors perform a war dance. They draw decorations on the shields using charcoal, limestone and pieces of burnt animal bones. Apart from these three shields, which are of special significance and can be used only by warriors, there is the common shield. This is used for fire fighting – people use it to ward off the heat from a fire as they chop down the huts in its way to stop it from spreading. It is also used by children and those training to be warriors, as they cannot use any of the other shields.The second section on women's attire is organised similar to the men's section, with descriptions and the significance of nine items. The *aghu-u*, a brass hair band, the *asakipili*, a soft hair band, the *tongpang*, a crystal earring, necklaces of different types of beads, the *tukutsukrestu*, a bodice, the *mekhala*, a skirt, the *kisen*, a bangle, the *puttee*, a stocking and the *angnaksu*, a shawl, are among the items of clothing and adornment that are described.

The final section is a description of six musical instruments—three wind, one string and two percussion instruments. The cup violin is the string instrument that is described. It is a small violin-like instrument made using the dried shell of a bitter gourd or a hard and thin bamboo. This forms the cup, while a thin bamboo stick forms the stem. The string of this violin is the hair of a woman, obtained by the artisan from the head of his ladylove. This is played using a bow made from a bamboo stick and a thin bamboo fibre. Another typically Naga instrument is the bamboo flute—so popular it is that all the Naga tribes use it. The Angami *lou*, the Sema *fulili*, the Zeilam *nthiam*, the Konyak *wewo*, the Ao and Phom *jemji*, the Lotha *philili*, the Rengma *kheli*, the Khiamngan *poipoi* and the Sangtam *khongkoli*—all these are nothing but the bamboo flute. It is made out of *ani*, a thin bamboo, cut between two nodes. This is finished with a *dao* to make a flute. The Nagas usually play the flute just after sunset. Both men and women, young and old, play the flute. In three sections, the book covers three major aspects of the material culture of the Nagas.

While the work has all the makings of a good repository of information on Naga material culture, there are a few glaring defects that render it practically useless as a reference. The first is the absence of any kind of introduction. What passes for a preface is a wildly rambling tale of how the author and the editor met. The absence of an introduction makes the reader feel a bit lost. Who are the Nagas? How many different tribes constitute the Nagas? And do all these different tribes use all the things described in the book? These are the questions that arise as one reads the book. The descriptions themselves are quite arbitrary, some are very short, while others ramble on and on, delving into related myths and legends. Again, the names of the items described are given at random in a few of the different Naga dialects. There is no consistency or pattern to this. A little more organisation, a little more uniformity in the presentation and a little more orientation towards a reader who is new to Naga culture would go a long way in making the book a valuable reference for scholars who wish to study Naga material culture.

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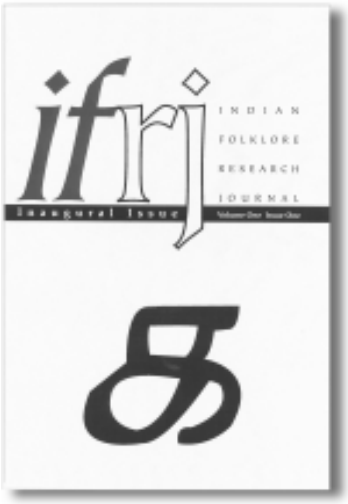

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