

## **ADDRESS**

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### **SEMINAR ON KUTIYATTAM: THE PROBLEMS OF COMMUNICATION**

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE 10<sup>TH</sup> YEARLY CELEBRATION  
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR KUTIYATTAM  
TRIPUNITHURA, KERALA**

**December 3, 2006**

Namaskaram

I am honored to be invited to deliver a Address on the occasion of the Seminar on Kutiyattam: Problems of Communication here in Tripunithura. This gives me an opportunity to point out some of the changes that seem to have taken place in kutiyattam since I first began to study it over 30 years ago. Since my next books is entitled, Continuity and Change in Kutiyattam, I welcome any opinions you might have on the subject before the book goes to press early next year. I want to follow this brief review of the changes I am seeing in kutiyattam with a question about the current state and future of the art.

When I first saw kutiyattam at the Kerala Kalamandalam with L.S. Rajagopalan in 1969 and was taken into the kuttampalams of Haripad and Irinjalakada by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar I was a wide-eyed novice. My real education began when I started to study kutiyattam in 1974 under my supervising teacher Painkulam Rama Cakyar and my ashan Kalamandalam Raman Cakyar. It was then that I met the great artists of the day and many of those who are now responsible for sustaining this wonderful genre of performance now. Subsequent trips to India and a half-year visit of my ashan to the State University of New York/Stony Brook where we produced the Kutiyattam Ramayana have provided me with an exposure to the art, even if my attention has continually been diverted by my duties as a professor first at Michigan State University, then at the University at Stony Brook, and now at the University of Georgia/Athens.

Over this span of time a great deal appears to have happened that I want to briefly comment on.

It seems to me that the level of sophistication of the mizhavu drumming, the number of new young artists, and the vigor of their playing has provided an opportunity for the actors to extend and expand the range of their bhava and rasa. In the two months since I have been in Kerala I have commissioned some extraordinary performances from actors whose performances were aided enormously by this new generation of talented drummers. To me this is a positive direction, even if some may think a few artists a bit over zealous in their playing.

Mizhavu drumming has become so popular that mizhavu thayambaka has come into being and appear to be recognized as an independent form of artistic expression. Thimala as well as the idakka have been used in several performances I have seen but the Kuram Kuzhal is nowhere to be seen. In the 1970s I remember Kuzhal was used in several different performances both inside and outside the kuttampalam but idakka was rare. I never saw a thimala used in those days. Why these changes have come about I am not prepared to speculate.

Another new development appears to be that several nambyars are now engaged in performing Cakyar Kuttu based on the prabandhas. I don't remember this happening when I was first in Kerala.

An active revival has taken place in Nangyar kuttu. When I first came to Kerala the art seemed dead and nobody appeared interested in it. Today the picture has entirely changed and there is a call for performances and young girls seems to be clamoring to study it. Due to the efforts of my colleague Dr. Diane Daugherty and Smt. Nirmala Paniker, as well as many others I'm sure, another art has been rescued from obscurity and near extinction.

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

When I came to Kerala the Kerala Kalamandalam was the only major center for the study of kutiyattam. Today that is not the case. Kalaries have sprung up in Likkadi, Irinjalakuta, Tiruvanthapuram, and more recently there are those started by Usha Nangyar and Margi Madhu. The character of the attractive venues in these new centers of study offers a welcome contrast to the cold concrete structure of the Kalamandalam and seem more in keeping with an older and more interesting style of Kerala architecture.

When I came to Kerala this January for the conference in Tiruvanthapuram I noted that the pace of performances seem to have slowed down a bit. Indeed, the artists do not seem eager to speed through a performance for fear of boring their audience. This leisurely pace appears to be in keeping with the character of the art and allows the artists to fully explore the bhava and rasa inherent within individual works. Parenthetically, it is said that the Noh of Japan is now much slower than it originally was.

A new word has crept into the kutiyattam vocabulary. I do not remember that pakarnattam was ever used 30 years ago. Perhaps there are other such words that have also begun to be used and need definition.

Visual materials are now more readily available in the market place to those who are looking for examples of kutiyattam performance. The handsome disks on kutiyattam and nangyar kuttu available in DVD and VCD format by Invis are a positive contribution. Margi has produced three excellent DVDs based on the material filmed by the distinguished filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Margi's website promises the potential of 11 hours of material on the subject in the not too distant future, I trust. Natana Kairali in Irinjalakuda and Margi Madhu have brought out VCDs and DVDs that are handsome and useful windows into the world of performance. My own CD-ROM produced by the University of Michigan Press offers considerable material, both visual and aural, as well as textual for those who are interested. And there are several programs, formatted on NTSC videotape, each over an hour long on kutiyattam and other genres of Asian performance, created at Michigan State University and available from that university at [http://orders.dip.msu.edu/category\\_s/19.htm](http://orders.dip.msu.edu/category_s/19.htm) or from Insight Media, NY. I'm sure that there must be more visual materials. Some years ago I purchased two videotapes in PAL format from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi. I suspect that there are priceless other materials lingering in its archives just waiting to be developed and distributed.

The internet now offers many people around the world ready access to websites containing text materials and photographs on kutiyattam. At the International Conference on Kutiyattam in January I said that the search engine Google revealed only thirteen thousand three hundred hits for kutiyattam. A few days ago I discovered that that number has risen to 19,200. This seems to be a positive sign of interest. The internet offers seemingly unlimited potential for growth in materials on kutiyattam and other Kerala genres of performance. I note that the Mani family has laid claim to a domain name called [kutiyattam.com](http://kutiyattam.com) which may well provide an avenue for research and information.

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

I sense an absence of seasoned critics ready to express their opinion to the artists. With the passing of Appukuttan Nair and several others, as well as the aging of a generation of kutiyattam buffs, I do not see critics who are willing and able to advise the artists on the quality of their work. On the other hand, published criticism of kutiyattam and nangyar kuttu has increased. Unfortunately, many of the newspaper critics are not well-qualified to appraise the quality of a performance and so often only express their opinions in the most general and vaguest of terms. What is needed today are educated, seasoned critics who can advise the artists about how they may improve, especially since kutiyattam and nangyar kuttu are moving farther and farther away from temple performance where ritual is important into the arena of competition with other art forms that claim public attention.

Foreign tours of kutiyattam and nangyar kuttu has now become common place and the artists have exposed audiences in Europe, Asia, and America, something that was never dreamed of in the past. These tours have also given the artists an opportunity to witness other genres of performance and the greater world of performance outside India.

Academic recognition has also taken place, like the establishments of courses of study at the Shri Shankara University of Sanskrit at Kalady where Usha Nangyar and Margi Madhu are teaching. Call for lecture-demonstrations of the artists at other educational institutions around India is also a new, and in my view, a positive development. I am pleased to note that VCDs are available in the market place documenting performances by higher secondary school kids like those who participated in the 8<sup>th</sup> Kerala State Youth festival. I note two VCDs, one on Cakyar Kuttu and one on Kutiyattam. Perhaps more youth have entered the festivals performing these arts and are getting some training in them. Is this not a potential audience for the future? At the same time, structural changes in the education of artists at the Kerala Kalamandalam seem to have disrupted the focus of students away from the art. In my opinion, it is not particularly good for students who seek intensive professional training to have to focus on other subjects. Imagine ballet schools in Russia and the United States forcing their dancers to take general education courses while training to be professional ballet dancers? It is unthinkable.

Today, there are surely many more books and articles that have been published on kutiyattam and nangyar kuttu than were in print in the 70s. Unfortunately, too many of them are hampered by poor systems of distribution and so linger in storage rather than grace the shelves of bookshops in Kerala and elsewhere in India and abroad. Many of these works could also benefit from a strong editorial hand, something I fear is not common in Indian circles of publication.

There is a demographic shift in those who come from abroad to study kutiyattam and nangyar kuttu. Fewer American students now seem to be making their way to India and more Europeans are to be seen, especially students and scholars from France, Germany, and Poland.

Undoubtedly, there are many more changes that have taken place. Many of you are in a better position to cite them. Forgive me if I have neglected to do so.

And now let me pose a question which I want to rhetorically answer in brief. It is this, "To Whom does kutiyattam now belong?" On the face of it, this may seem to be obvious but frankly, I'm not so sure.

With the UNESCO designation kutiyattam seems now to be claimed by "Humanity" and so should not grow and change with the times. After all, when UNESCO decided to designate certain monuments around the world, like the Taj for example, it meant to suggest that these edifices should remain virtually the same, protected from change, like that brought about by air pollution that has begun to erode the surface of the monument. UNESCO recognized kutiyattam in part because of the kuttampalams and their connection to their heritage in Kerala temples. Some of Adoor Gopalakrishnan's film was

made in the kuttampalam perhaps to connect in the mind of officials of UNESCO that this is a “temple based art,” and should be preserved, as such.

Or does kutiyattam belong to the artists who know how to perform it? Today this includes those of castes other than the cakyars, nambyars, and nangyars that originally created it. If so, those who are not hereditary artists cannot perform in the kuttampalams and temples. Indeed, the rights to perform in many temples are still held only by certain cakyar families. Can it be that kutiyattam is no longer the property of the hereditary artists? And can foreign students of the art now claim the privilege to perform the art because they have studied it, even though they may not live in Kerala and are not Hindus?

Or does kutiyattam belong to the temples that nurtured it even if many have long abandoned supporting it?

Does kutiyattam rightly belong to the people of Kerala, many of whom are proud of this heritage and proclaim it to tourists as a classical Kerala art nurtured in “God’s Own Country?” The Kerala Department of Tourism is making a decided effort to proclaim that the performing arts of Kerala offer tourists a unique side of Indian civilization.

Is it the property of a larger entity, namely India where it came into being? If so is it right to say that it represents the Sanskrit theatre of India, as some have proclaim and yet others have strongly denied.

Is it an art of the past or that of the future? Should it remain lodged in the past as the UNESCO designation seems to imply that it should or should it develop and grow like other arts have done elsewhere in India. I’m thinking here of the jatra and Purulia Chhau of Bengal, both of which have made major changes in costume, subject matter, manner of presentation, etc. despite the outcry of concerned critics who believe that the original intention of both arts has been lost due to modern modifications.

As I see it, kutiyattam and nangyar kuttu are facing a dynamic new social order, one that tolerates and encourages change. I believe that it would be profitable to investigate the manner in which the Balinese rose to the challenge of continuity and change when Indonesia decided to declare Bali “the window to Indonesia” and began a major tourism effort on that peaceful island with extraordinary traditional arts. Alert to the potential of experiencing serious damage to its traditional arts the Balinese elected to keep their ritual practices in tact in the temple and in daily life but to offer a kind of “tourist” performance that was palatable to foreigners and even acceptable to many local inhabitants. Can something be learned in Kerala by studying the Balinese solution?

In closing, I think it behoves all those who are involved to discuss the potentials for the future after examining all the possibilities and to make a concerted effort to do so with an authoritative mandate in mind.