

## FIRT PAPER

Amsterdam Conference

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### Introduction

On May 18, 2001 UNESCO "proclaimed" 19 genres of performance as "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity." Kutiyattam, the Sanskrit Theater of India, was one of the 19. It was the only genre in India to be so named. To celebrate this momentous occasion, a performance of kutiyattam by the Margi Company was presented in June at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. I had an opportunity to see a dress rehearsal in their tiny performance venue in Trivandrum prior to the departure of the company.

It isn't difficult for me to see why kutiyattam received the nod from UNESCO.

Supporters have long expressed a desire that the art receive greater recognition. In the early part of the 20th century little was known about the art, even in India. But with the discovery and subsequent publication of thirteen plays attributed to the ancient classical playwright Bhasa, Indian scholars were alerted to the existence of kutiyattam whose artists preserved methods of performing a few of his lesser known works since at least 10th century C.E.. Through the 20th century a small but growing body of scholars and artists, like Cliff and Betty True Jones, were attracted to Kerala to study. They joined local experts in warning that the art was in danger of dying unless drastic measures were taken. Once the artists began to perform outside the Kerala temples, state and central government financial support was forthcoming. Recognitions and awards by the state and national academies soon followed. Eventually, international tours and performance at international venues in Europe, the U.S.A., and Asia helped to further raise the consciousness of the existence of what may well be the oldest surviving example of sustained performance surviving from the ancient world.

## Kutiyattam

But before mentioning the benefits and potential dangers of UNESCO's designation, perhaps I ought to say a few words about this remarkable art. Imagine that you are a first time viewer, like many of those who attended the Paris function last June. Using this CD-ROM I developed for the University of Michigan Press let me introduce you to kutiyattam. 1. (1.11 nambiar ashan performing rituals) Ritual formality marks the beginning of virtually every performance. 2. (1.7 & 1.8 actors in makeup and costume) One is immediately struck by the exotic makeup and costumes of the characters. 3. (1.9 start video with sound down, Shylaja performing stylized eyes, face, and gestures) The staging conventions are likely to be unfamiliar to many western viewers. Symbolic gesture language, exaggerated facial expressions and eye movements, as well as the stylized physical movements, all characterize a performance. 4. (continue 1.9 as long as necessary) A single oil lamp stands downstage center. The actors focus their attention in the direction of the lamp and often stand or sit relatively close to it. At the base of the lamp are objects that have symbolic significance: a tray with incense sticks, flowers, rice, and other small objects too tiny for spectators to see from a distance, as well as a large container of unhusked rice from which a spray of small white branches gracefully droops. 5. (1.10 musical instruments) Musicians are ever present during a show: invariably two drummers sit behind the actors facing the spectators, two women sit on the floor stage right striking small metal cymbals. The sound of drums starts and ends every performance.

You can't help but notice that there is an absence of scenery altogether, which might help to indicate the time, and location of the dramatic action. 6. (1.5 red curtain) A simple rectangular red curtain is held by attendants to mask entrances and exits. 7. (1.6 climax the action) At times the pace of the dramatic of the dramatic action seems leisurely. Often it is punctuated by dynamic conflicts between competing characters. 8. (1.12 Raman and other actors performing) The flow of the action emphasizes abbreviated story elements and acting rather than a linear plot with beginning, middle, and end so often expected in western drama. Even if they might not have grasped what they were

watching those who saw the Paris performance are likely to have been struck by the ability of the performers who obviously exhibited exceptional command of their art.

What the Paris audience could not possibly experience is the depth and complexity of kutiyattam. That is difficult to fathom in the west. Even in India, for that matter. Many of these features are unique to this genre. For example: 1. [\(2.4.1.1 video of Haripad temple and theatre in context\)](#) Kutiyattam performances were designed to coincide with the celebration of rituals and festivals of Hindu temples of Kerala even though today it is possible to witness performances in other venues and apart from any ritual intention, almost as one might expect of a classical concert. 2. [\(2.4.3.1 buttons of temple theatres\)](#)

Nested in specially designed theatre spaces within the walled compounds of nearly a dozen temples, performances take on an entirely different feel from those seen in other physical surroundings. 3. [\(7.4.1 video sound of drums inside the vatakumnathan temple\)](#) For one thing the acoustical properties of the drums are rich and more resonant in the temple theatres owing to the high wooden roof of the building and canopied wooden ceiling above the roofed stage. 4. [\(4.1.1 LSR and other spectators\)](#) Spectators sit in close approximation to the actors. 5. [\(4.3.1 audience watching a play\)](#) Relatively few people may see performances in the temple theatres at any one time. Ordinarily about fifty and no more than a few hundred at most. 6. [\(4.3.2 and 4.3.4 audience members watching a play\)](#) Spectators watch the actors from below, sitting on the floor of the building. Unlike so many western theatre houses, they do not see the performers head on or from above. 7. [\(2.4.1.10 and 2.4.1.12\)](#) Entrances and exits are made from stage doors: entrances are normally made through the up-left door, while the up-right door provides for conventional exits. 8. [\(5.3.4.1 Usha performing before oil lamp\)](#) It is rare to see a temple performance today in which the oil lamp is the only source of illumination although that is most certainly the way art was originally to be seen. Electric lights, florescent lights, or even petromax lamps are now used to flood the stage with flat unflattering illumination. Yet fire still serves as a witness to all performances. A large metal lamp with an enormous bowl of oil provides bright flames. It also generates plenty of smoke that blackens the ornate wooden carvings on the underside of the stage roof and fills the

theatre hall with a distinctive odour. 9. (2.4.1.13 dressing room picture) The dressing room for the actors is directly behind the upstage doors and thus the actors may make immediate adjustments in their costumes and makeup any time if need be, without severely disrupting the flow of action. 10. (3.3.6 Raman doing anguliyankam) Spectators for temple performances do not pay an admission fee. Indeed, they often attend performances after they have prayed at the inner most shrine before the chief deity. 11. (continue anguli as need be) A performance of any one act or segment of an act of a play is usually given only once and is rarely if ever repeated day after day. Unlike in the western commercial theatre where it is common practice to repeat performances until audiences tire of seeing them, in Kerala temple performances the actors are obliged to perform only according to the dictates of the temple authorities.

12. (5.2.3 video of oil massage) Actors require years to master this complicated art. We rarely think of actors being sent for training at the age of nine or ten years old, nor do we think of training as being a 24-hour a day expectation of a pupil. But that is exactly what is required in kutiyattam. In Kerala the child apprentices himself or herself to a master teacher and is expected to devote an entire lifetime to study. Training is particularly difficult for students who do not come from the castes who have traditionally served as kutiyattam artists. They and non-Hindu students generally restricted from participating in temple performances. Non-Hindus are still forbidden admission to many Kerala temples. Although these students anticipate a life of performance they may not ever experience the joy of performing in the theatres for which kutiyattam was designed to be seen and heard.

13. (3.3.4 Kutan doing Esha Bho) Our hypothetical Paris audience will probably not understand the deeper visual and aural significance of a performance since the meaning of precise gestures is likely to elude them as are the chants in unfamiliar languages such as Sanskrit, Prakrit, and old Malayalam. Indeed, even in Kerala, each art form has its

own unique vocabulary of gestures and meanings and Sanskrit scholars in one part of India are not likely to understand or even acknowledge the pronunciation of the Sanskrit chanted by the actors of kutiyattam. First time spectators are also unlikely to realize or appreciate the close connection and significance of the gestures, face and eye expressions, and musical accompany and body movements which are used to convey character. 14. (5.4.2.1 buttons of gestures and 8.1.20 hastalakshanadipika in devanagari and 5.3.2.2 buttons of eye exercises and 5.3.3.2 buttons of facial expressions) More subtle conventions are likely to be lost on them altogether. It may come as a shock to the uninitiated to learn that kutiyattam is not widely known in India or even in Kerala.

UNESCO's designation

It isn't difficult for me to rationalize why an 18-member panel of jurors representing UNESCO choose kutiyattam as one of the 19 genres of performance to recognize. The art has sustained history since at least the 10th century C.E. It has unique theatre structures designed specifically for its use, some of which are still being used for performance today. Kutiyattam is linked to the classical tradition of Sanskrit drama, a tradition that is among the oldest, if not the oldest, surviving performance traditions in Asia.

However, perusing UNESCO's website for clues to why genres of performance were singled out one is struck by the definition of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The website says: "The New proclamation honours: 1. forms of popular and traditional expression - such as languages, oral literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, costumes, craftwork know-how, architecture." Strangely, no mention is made of theatre and drama. The definition goes on to include "2. cultural spaces - a place where popular and traditional cultural activities take place in a concentrated manner (sites for story-telling, rituals, marketplaces, festivals, etc.) or the time for a regularly occurring event (daily rituals, annual processions, regular performances)." Kutiyattam clearly falls into some of these categories, although it is not an easy fit.

UNESCO defends its decision to make these designations because it says, "The oral and intangible heritage....plays an essential role in national and international development, tolerance and harmonious interaction between cultures. In an era of globalization, many forms of this cultural heritage are in danger of disappearing, threatened by cultural standardization, armed conflict, tourism industrialization, rural exodus, migration and environmental deterioration."

The "threats" that endanger each of the 19 genres are identified by UNESCO on its website. Kutiyattum is said to 1. Lack funding to support production, and 2. to be experiencing a decline in the number of families of artist. However, there is a decided disconnect between the threats UNESCO mentioned and the actions that are proposed to the address them. The action plan that is proposed for the next decade is 1. to create an archive and library (although where this is to be housed, who is to run it, what it is to contain, and for whom it is to be made available is not indicated) 2. to organize workshops (for whom these are to be held for what purpose they are to be organized is not indicated) 3. To organize training facilities (where, by, and for whom is also not made clear) 4. Production of a series on master-performers (presumably this is to be a television or film series on the few surviving artists of the older generation although it is not indicated in the summary of the plan) 5. to make traditional theatres available for performers (this implies a desire to persuade temples to open their doors to non-Hindus which has here-to-for not been permitted in many parts of the state. It also implies that non-Hindu artists and those Hindus not from the castes of temple servants might have access to perform in traditional theatres), and finally, 6. to build two new theatres (how these might be designed or where they might be located is also not forthcoming, although it is fair to say that Trivandrum, capital of the state of Kerala and home to the Margi company, is a likely location for at least one of the buildings because it does not have access to a traditional theatre structure. Nor does Ernakulum, the largest city of the state and site of the major tourism industry).

In her article in *The Hindu*, Sudha Gopalakrishnan, a retired ICS officer who organized the file, which was sent to the central government ministry for approval and submission to UNESCO, fleshes out a few parts of the action plan in greater detail. She says that the first artist that should be documented is the venerated Kutiyattam master and teacher Ammannoor Madhava Chakyar, last of a generation of excellent performers. She also identifies that performance opportunities should be promoted and existing training and research facilities should be strengthened. She goes on to suggest, "promoting performance opportunities, strengthening the training and research facilities in the existing schools, extension of its repertoire by referring to the old acting manuals, ensuring wider dissemination through lecture-demonstrations, performances, cultural exchanges, tours and so on."

Among the threats that are NOT articulated by either UNESCO or by Ms. Gopalakrishnan are the following, which I have heard expressed by those who work in this field:

1. Proliferation of training centers funded by state, national, and private organizations although initially welcomed have encouraged competition for funding and watered down available resources resulting in artists competing with each other.
2. The presumption that a great deal of money might be earned from their art has led some artists to turn their attention away from training and performance and toward finding ways to increase their income.
3. Serious decay and even willful destruction of some of the performance sites has been taking place for some years now.
4. Standards have been severely reduced at some institutions owing to petty party politics and internal bickering. I am thinking here of the Kerala Kalamandalam, the state academy for training in Kerala performing arts which established a

training wing for kutiyattam in the early days of its existence. The Kalamandalam initially demonstrated high standards of excellence but has been seriously weakened of late owing to the absence of strong leadership and clearheaded direction. This has resulted in many of the teachers becoming disenchanted with the institution.

5. The changing political situation in Kerala has often destabilized traditional sources of income. Temple boards, which once sponsored kutiyattam performances, rarely do so now. Only a few temples make an effort to continue the practice.

### Implications

On the UNESCO website and in The Hindu article "globalism" and "tourists" are depicted as dangerous threats if not downright "villains." Yet, one might ask have they been "bad" for sites such as the Taj Mahal? Hasn't this wonder of the world and India benefited from international exposure and attention? Yet, one wonders what might happen if the same degree of attention were lavished on kutiyattam. Certainly, last summer in anticipation of kutiyattam's honour, the Tourism Bureau of the State of Kerala was set to publish a brochure of advertising kutiyattam and encouraging tourists to see it when visiting the state. Can such a form, which has always been small-scale and dependent on small audiences, survive unscathed should there be a large-scale demand for artists to produce more works more often?

Might this lead to a reconfiguration of the art? A non-critical, modern public has often dictated that the length of performances be reduced to accommodate modern tastes and modern lifestyles. At a performance in Trivandrum, in the mid-1970s,

organizers went backstage to implore the artists to cut short their acting embellishments. The actors did so at the blink of an eye leaping to the end of the show and tying up loose ends in a matter of minutes. Major adjustments were made by the Margi company for the Paris show last June to accommodate just such expectations. It would seem that "He who pays the piper calls the tune."

Then, too, is it a good thing when bricks and mortar take precedence over people? Who is there to guide the construction on new theatres to memorialize kutiyattam? Who are these theatres intending to serve? Will they be exclusively used for kutiyattam performances that has its own needs for performance space, acoustics and lighting or will they be shared facilities with other theatre organizations that have different demands? Will these new spaces provide western style seating or will they attempt to recreate the simplicity of the surviving temple theatres in which the audience sits on the floor? Even though the so-called kutampalam theatre at the Kerala Kalamandalam in Cheruthuruthy was guided by the hand of Appakuthan Nair, a tasteful and powerful supporter of classical Kerala arts, it is better suited to the needs of the kathakali, and other genres of Kerala dance and dance-drama than it does to those of the kutiyattam. Although an impressive structure, it clearly is limited and limiting for the artists who use it.

There is already competition among the surviving families of kutiyattam artists, even though hostilities have not grown so deep as to keep artists from meeting and talking with each other. Will the UNESCO designation tend to favour some groups of artists over others? Who is there to promote fairness and to guide the process of development so that all the training organizations will grow and prosper?

When UNESCO recognized monuments such as the Taj, it was taken for granted that governments would be involved in preserving and maintaining the structure and grounds so that it would not deteriorate. This means that access to the site is restricted and changes to the site are prohibited. Will the hoped for government support bring with it unwanted strings?

And if so, what changes will be deemed appropriate and what will be considered inappropriate? Who will take the responsibility for allowing any and all changes? Will it be the artists or will it fall to powerful outside forces? It is well known that Appakuthan Nair dictated changes in performances of kutiyattam when he set up the Margi company. Of course there have been precedents for this. Unnaiyi Warrior, the makeup artist and long time teacher of costume and makeup at the Kerala Kalamandalam, is reported to have modified the crowns of the female characters in kutiyattam at the direction of Rama Cakyar, the chief teacher of the art in the early days of that institution. But then both Warrior and Cakyar Ashan were artists. Nair was not. In Gujarat Mansujh Joshi, a non-artist, is known to have made alterations in Bhavai. Dr. Sivaram Karanth, an excellent popular writer, took similar liberties with Yakshagana of South Kanara. Dr. Sunil Kothari, an academic, recommended changes to Kuchipudi artists in Andhra and throughout India. The list goes on and on. Are there sophisticated patrons alive today who are knowledgeable enough and powerful enough to dictate what kutiyattam artists should perform and how they should perform it?

### Politics of Recognition

When I am in one of my more cynical frames of mind, I continue to speculate why UNESCO singled out kutiyattam. Agreed, on artistic level kutiyattam is no

ordinary genre of theatre. It is a temple based art, nurtured and preserved for a long period of time in the Hindu temples of Kerala. In one sense it must be regarded as a "privileged" art, part of what some have described as the "greater tradition." One must remember that the candidature file was forwarded to UNESCO by the Ministry of Culture operating under the BJP Party, known for its right wing, Hindu fundamentalist views. Since kutiyattam is closely associated with the Nambudiri Brahmin community of the Hindu temples, and traditionally performed by the cakyar community (those who wear a sacred thread) then it may clearly be viewed as sustaining and supporting conservative views, even though for centuries the artists have not hesitated to criticize even those of many other castes and communities during the improvisational segments of their shows.

I am doubtful if a theatre genre that was not so "privileged" would have come to the attention of the Ministry of Culture in this particular government. I am not aware if there were any other applicants submitted through the pipeline, or what the rationale might have been for them not being chosen to be sent to Paris. My guess is that for once, kutiyattam was in the right place at the right time.

Time will only tell. As spectators and supporters we can only hope that kutiyattam and the artists it represents shape its destiny the way deemed best.

1. (1.11 nambiar ashan performing rituals)
2. (1.7 & 1.8 actors in makeup and costume)
3. (1.9 start video with sound down, Shylaja performing stylized eyes, face, and gestures)
4. (continue 1.9 as long as necessary)
5. (1.10 musical instruments)
6. (1.5 red curtain)
7. (1.6 climax of the action)
8. (1.12 Raman and other actors performing)

## Part II

1. (2.4.1.1 video of Haripad temple and theatre in context)
2. (2.4.3.1 buttons of temple theatres)
3. (7.4.1 video sound of drums inside the vatakumnathan temple)
4. (4.1.1 LSR and other spectators)
5. (4.3.1 audience watching a play)
6. (4.3.2 and 4.3.4 audience members watching a play)
7. (2.4.1.10 and 2.4.1.12)
- 8 (5.3.4.1 Usha performing before oil lamp)
9. (2.4.1.13 dressing room picture)
- 10.(3.3.6 Raman doing anguliyankam)
- 11.(continue anguli as need be)

12.(5.2.3 video of oil massage)

13. (3.3.4 Kutan doing Esha Bho)

14. (5.4.2.1 buttons of gestures, 8.1.20 hastalakshanadipika in devanagari, 5.3.2.2 buttons of eye exercises, 5.3.3.2 buttons of facial expressions)