KATHAKALI – A STUDY OF THE AESTHETIC PROCESSES OF POPULAR SPECTATORS AND ELITIST APPRECIATORS ENGAGING WITH PERFORMANCES IN KERALA.

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Kathakali – a study of the aesthetic processes of popular spectators and elitist appreciators engaging with performances in Kerala.

John Glynn

ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the diverse aesthetic approaches of onlookers to Kathakali, a traditional dance-drama extant in Kerala, India. Its particular contribution is based on fieldwork undertaken in the period 1991-93, especially in the districts of Trichur and Palghat, and distinguishes a continuum of two over-lapping broad groups: popular spectators and elitist appreciators who provide different, contesting voices in the interviews.

The aesthetic processes of individuals within these groups of onlookers and the ways in which they may gradually change form the primary focus of this work. Respondents to interviews provide diverse descriptions of their interactions with performances according to their perceived membership to groups of popular spectators or elitist appreciators. They also identify dimensions of performance that may contribute to the development of their own performance competence and their subsequent transition from one group of onlookers to another.

The influences that shape the diverse approaches of these groups and have been examined here include traditional Hindu aesthetics, religion, politics, caste structures and the changing shape of patronage, which is itself also a reflection of historical factors of governance.

Kathakali is first presented as vignettes of performance that reflect different locations, venues, patronage and program choices. It is then situated in relation to extant, contiguous performance genres that have contributed to its development and/or often share its billing in traditional settings.

The politics and aesthetics of the worlds of Kathakali are looked at not only in terms of their traditional, folkloric and classical development but also in contrast to more contemporary, secular and controversial dynamics that are impacting upon Kathakali today.
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Chapter One - Historicising Kathakali

Introduction

A study of performance, as a microcosm, is better informed when it draws upon multiple disciplines. Historical contexts can add much to our understanding of the ways in which performance has evolved to its current forms. In this chapter I provide an introductory overview of the historical and political determinants of Kathakali and a discussion of theories relating to aesthetics and emotions. In Chapter Two I approach Kathakali by way of its performance determinants. Together, the historical, political and performance determinants provide a basis from which to re-examine some important features in the historically received phenomenon of Kathakali, and such meta-phenomena as mainstream criticism and elitist, high-culture views on it.

This Chapter is organised in three parts. Part I, A Lineal Perspective, provides a cavalcade of specific historical factors that have impacted upon the development of Kathakali from its origins until modern times. Part II, Modernity and Postcoloniality, departs from that linearity to introduce some of the wider interpretive issues that are associated with contemporary questions relating to developing national identities, Orientalism, and Post-Colonial Theories. These historical and ideological forces have surely influenced the responses of current spectator reception responses along with the developments in the evolving productions of Kathakali. Part III, Aesthetics and Emotions, looks at defining aesthetics for anthropology and then considers some Western philosophers whose work, according to some Indian writers, may serve as useful correlatives with Indian epistemologies and aesthetics.

The historical overview of the development of Kathakali, provided in Part One, is organised in terms, firstly, of related developments in language and literature within the Hindu context of what is now Kerala and then through the changes to performance traditions, which “may be thought of as dynamic
systems of human action in an ongoing process of generation and degeneration” (Zarrilli 1992a: 91). Zarrilli (1992a: 92) provides a helpful, concise definition and looks at the importance of patronage as a developmental factor:

A performance tradition is one type of culturally assumed and often self-consciously identified system of human action organised around a particular type of performance. For kathakali, as for other similar artistic genres, its origin, maintenance, and alteration as a culturally distinct performance tradition have been inextricably linked to its patronage.

For his analysis of patrons and patronage, Zarrilli (1992a: 94) adopts the useful temporal frame of three phases of Kathakali history, beginning with the formative years that extended from the late seventeenth century origins to the late eighteenth century when there emerged an identifiable genre that today is known as Kathakali. The late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century provided the period of maturation “during which time there was further refining of the subtle expressive possibilities within carefully circumscribed performative limits of the tradition (Zarrilli 1992a: 94).” The modern period ushers in the more institutionalising influences on Kathakali patronage and training practices of the twentieth and present centuries. The impetus for these modern trends can be found in the initiatives stemming from the poet Vallathol’s determination in the 1920’s to revitalise interest in Kathakali and establish an institutional infrastructure that might safeguard and promote this performance tradition in a socio-economic environment that had undergone radical re-structuring with significant losses in its traditional patronage.

In linguistic terms, Kathakali’s deep roots lay in Kutiyattam, the Sanskrit drama tradition that has survived to the present day in Kerala. The survival of this performance tradition has been “due to the persistence of the Sanskritic tradition among the Nambudiri Brahmans and other classes of high status within Kerala’s societal hierarchy (Jones 1983:14).” However, it is also within the tradition of Sanskrit drama that Zarrilli (1992a: 100) traces “precedent for kingly patronage and for the artistic involvement of the ruler as author”, which are found in the examples of Saktibhadra in the 9th-10th century and Kulasekhara in the 11th-12th centuries. Zarrilli indicates that selected acts from these plays are still performed today within the Kutiyattam tradition but notes that it was not until the emergence of Ramanattam/Kathakali and
Krishnanattom in the latter part of the 17th century that further royal dramatists appeared.

Part II, *Modernity and Postcoloniality*, provides a kaleidoscopic view of issues that relate to the interpreting of modern Indian history against the textual politics of post-colonial times. It looks at the dilemmas that arise in post-colonial discussion, the re-interpreting of intertwined cultural responses, the interdependence of attributes and contributions that can be identified in intercultural situations. It seeks to provide an historical context for art historian, Coomaraswamy, to whom extensive reference has been made in this thesis. It also looks at some of the genealogical issues of postcoloniality, at developing national identities, at the hybrid nature and diasporic dimensions of such identities, at Orientalism and the likely pitfalls it raises for historians and Indologists, at Marxist influences and at Romanticism, at the looping of history rather than the linearity, which suggests rather a tentative labelling within postcolonial revisions, not unlike the pouring of old wine into new bottles. The kaleidoscope turns and briefly brings into focus a complexity of issues relevant to India’s national identities, to Kerala’s politics and to postcolonial performances in Kathakali. Within this last context and in reference to the production of intercultural performance, Zarrilli (1992b:17) points out that “if individual and group identities are being shaped in an interculture of juxtaposition and disjuncture, the reflexive awareness of and attention to this condition is primarily part of the discourse of an educated and/or artistic elite”.

In Part III, I consider the problematics of suitably defining aesthetics in a manner that can be understood in the west, without prejudice to Indian epistemologies. In regard to Indian thinking, Pandit (1977:4) makes the transcendental link between aesthetics and metaphysics very clear when he concisely traces the derivation of the concept of “beauty”:

In Indian thought the concept of “beauty” comes from the metaphysical concept of *ananda* which is pure delight. According to the Upanishads cosmic creation derives from *ananda*, has its being, life and sustenance in it [*Taittiriya Upanishad*, ii], [*Aitareya Aranaka*, 11.1.8.1].
However, in Western thinking there seems often to be a “measure of indeterminate-ness” (Van Damme, 1966:13) in terminology relating to aesthetics and it is this factor that prompts Van Damme’s comment on “an aura of elusiveness that scares off non-initiates” in its study. He thus raises the importance of a close examination of the kinds of definitions of aesthetics that are useful to anthropology. Van Damme also raises (1996:3) the particular problems that attach to attempts at “empirical investigation into aesthetics”; apart from the sensitive issue of translation, there are the problems that are created by verbalised views on aesthetics: “For the degree to which aesthetic preference can be put into words is subject to discussion”. Mindful of the significance of these factors as a preamble to the investigation of Indian aesthetics, I also take up Van Damme’s (1996:xiii) assertion that:

the cultural relativity of the notion of beauty may be clarified by pointing out that in a given culture those forms or formal characteristics are experienced as aesthetically pleasing which in terms of this culture aptly signify its socio-cultural values and ideals.

The maxim that is expounded here by Van Damme is also illustrated by Feld (1990) in his “ethnographic study of sound as a cultural system, that is a system of symbols, among the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea”(1990:3). However, Feld makes particular reference to the problematic of the analyst’s own aesthetic sensibilities and the need for “co-aesthetic witnessing”. Feld, (1990:236) says:

I cannot understand how one might study aesthetic systems without a concern for aesthetic intent in the analytic posture or a concern for how others perceive the analyst’s own aesthetic sensibilities. Concentrating on value-free, objective measurements of aesthetic preferences has done little to move us toward a more ethnographically informed or humanly sensitive understanding of other visual, musical, poetic, and choreographic systems. Illuminating experience (and not only function) and co-aesthetic witnessing can only be accomplished honestly if ethnographers let themselves feel and be felt as emotionally involved people who have an openly non-detached attitude about that which they seek to understand.
I. A Linear Perspective

The Formative Years

Of importance to the development of Kathakali traditions was the development of Malayalam as a local vernacular and subsequently as part of a literary tradition. The areas now known as Kerala and Tamilnadu held a strongly shared linguistic and cultural heritage up until the “prolonged political enmity between the Chera kings of Kerala and the Imperial Cholas of Tamilnadu (which) resulted in a growing separation of these two areas and their continuing development into culturally distinct, although related societies” (Jones 1983:14). Although Malayalam began to develop perhaps as early as the 9th or 10th century AD, it was the political turmoil of the 11th century that contributed to the emergence of Malayalam as a distinctive literary language among those works which continued to be produced in Sanskrit and in Manipravalam, a literary language that combines Sanskrit with Malayalam (Jones 1983:14). It was under the reign of Rajaraja Chola in the late 10th century that Chola aggression began and it continued until Rama Varma Kulashekhara defeated Kulottunga Chola in the late 11th century (Menon 1991:112-3).

When writing of the period of manipravalam literature from the thirteenth to the late fifteenth centuries, Zarrilli (1992a: 100) says:

(W)e know that rulers wrote poetry and were patrons of court writers and scholars (Ramachandran Nair 1971:215-216). Kathakali attakatha (performance texts) were stylistically moulded from a combination of the court-supported manipravalam tradition and the “cantabile song-mould”. From their inception the plays were characterised by a high degree of poetic conceit and the assimilation of Sanskrit (Chaitanya 1971:96). The early royal court dramatists were competent Sanskritists, following a tradition of learning continued in many courts of the petty principalities from the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries.
The Rise of the Bhakti Movement

Prior to the Kulashekara period Hinduism had not enjoyed a position of primacy among the religions of Kerala. However, its establishment then spectacularly eclipsed the rival faiths of Jainism and Buddhism and the Dravidian forms of worship. Menon (1991:124) says “the triumph of Hinduism was the natural corollary of the progress of Aryanisation which reached its climax in the 8th century A.D. with the influx of a fresh and influential batch of Brahmin immigrants into Kerala from outside”.

Within the established Hindu culture it was the religious movement of bhakti, which emphasised the notion of salvation through devotion, particularly to the Vaisnava avatars, Rama and Krishna, that was to provide an impetus for much of Kerala’s finest literature of the 16th century (Menon 1991:196-7). In regard to the perceived variance of bhakti from Vedic traditions, Walker (1983, vol.1: 138) says:

The Vedas as a rule do not favour the way of bhakti, and the rise of the devotional cults in Hinduism can only be explained by the influence of non-Vedic cultures. According to the Padma-purana the doctrine of devotion had its origin in the South, i.e., among the Dravidians. At first it met with strong opposition from Brahmin orthodoxy because of its disregard for traditional religious ceremonial, but later many Brahmins joined the movement and made substantial contributions to its development. The influence of Christianity on the doctrine of bhakti has frequently been pointed out.

Conscious of the limitations to widespread exposition of the philosophical teachings of Hinduism, which were very much confined to Sanskrit, the Hindu reformers of the day were convinced of the need to overcome the appeal of Jainism and Buddhism among the common people by way of a Hindu popular movement. Menon (1991:26) says:

In these circumstances, the more inspired and scholarly among the Hindu devotees sought to exterminate the rival sects by evolving and popularising a new cult of Bhakti, in an intense emotional surrender to a personal God in the form of Visnu or Siva.

The group of poet-devotees who expounded the new cult freely roamed about the countryside singing devotional songs (Bhajans) which they themselves composed out of their innate religious experience.
It was contact with the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and the ensuing violence, destruction of Hindu temples and economic depression that also provided a political climate ripe for the unifying influence of this religious movement. “Many of Kerala’s finest works of literature were written during the 16th century (Jones 1983:15)”. Melpatdur and Puntam were responsible for outstanding literary expressions of the bhakti movement in that period. However, it is to a contemporary of theirs, Tunchat Ezhuthachan (16th –17th centuries), that the title of “father of Malayalam literature” has often been bestowed. This highly distinguished Malayalam poet produced versions of both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, but it was his Ramayana that held particular “appeal for Malayalis, especially for the non-Brahman communities who, at last, had a vernacular version of the beloved epic (Jones 1983:15).”

**Patrons, Prestige and Popularity**

In his discussion of the multifaceted role of the early Kathakali patron Zarrilli (1992a: 96) discerns four dimensions:

First, there was provision for the social and economic means necessary to realise the art. Second, the ruler-as-patron was often an author/composer of performance texts (attakatha). Third, he was often directly involved in making decisions about the performative realisation of his texts on stage. And finally, the ruler-as-patron was himself the ideal audience member, a rasika for whom the performance could serve as a means of at least temporary transcendence through his enlightened appreciative sensibilities.

These differing contributions to Kathakali are now explored here through some of its more noteworthy early patrons from the beginnings of Ramanattom².
The Prince of Kottarakara

Against the background described above, it was the Prince of Kottarakara, from a Nayar ruling family in the south of Kerala, who produced, in the latter part of the 16th century, the series of eight plays devised for performance over eight nights and presenting the main theme of the Ramayana in dramatic form, to be collectively known as Ramanattom.

Non-Brahmin Malayalis, the great majority of whom were not educated in Sanskrit, then had in this dramatic form of the Ramayana their familiar and appealing stories both in the vernacular and in performances that rendered them more accessible. Because of their low ritual status, which prohibited their entry to the temples, most lower caste Malayalis were excluded from the Kutiyattam Sanskrit dramas that were being performed therein. The Prince of Kottarakara’s eight plays provided popular performances that were linguistically and spatially at a remove from the rarefied Sanskritic epicentre of Brahman influence within temple ritual. Jones (1983:16) remarks upon the relationships between popular and ritual importance as well as the pre-existing Malayalam writings of Ezhuttacchan as influences upon the Prince of Kottarakkara:

It seems certain that the immense popularity and ritual importance of the Ramayana cycle of Kutiyattam Sanskrit drama, as well as the Malayalam Ramayana of Ezhuttacchan, influenced the Prince of Kottarakkara in the writing of Ramanattam plays.

Staging of the Ramanattam plays in the early period borrowed many details from Kutiyattam Sanskrit drama.

Vettatu Raja

It was in a border area north of the old principality where Ezhuttacchan had been born that a member of the ruling Kshatriya family, Vettatu Raja, brought many improvements in dramatic presentation in the early seventeenth
century, the most significant being the introduction of the convention that relieved actors from singing. They were then freed up to focus on their acting and dancing while the musicians provided the sung narrative of the play. Jones (1983:18) says: “At this period, the make-up and costuming began to resemble those of Kutiyattam to an even greater degree, although the actors did not yet wear the chutti, the white frame for the lower part of the face”.

The Prince of Kottayam

Towards the end of the seventeenth century there had developed a number of troupes, called kaliyogam (Jones 1983:18), but it was by the Prince of Kottayam that a major event in the evolution of Kathakali was to be wrought. Between 1665 and 1681 he produced four plays based on stories drawn not from the Ramayana but from the thematic material of the Mahabharata. The term “Ramanattom” was clearly no longer comprehensive of the new works so this dance-drama was thereafter known as Kathakali (“story-play”) (Jones 1983:20-22). The four plays composed by the Prince of Kottayam remain important today in the repertoire of Kathakali: Bakavadha “The Killing of Baka”), Kalyanasaugandhika (“The Auspicious Fragrant Flower”), Kirmiravadha (“The Killing of Kirmira”) and Nivatakavacha Kalakeyavadha (“The Killing of Nivatakavacha and Kalakeya”).

Regarding the modifications wrought by the Prince of Kottayam, Panikkar (1993:34) says:

He wanted to evolve a style which could accommodate heroic characters like the Pandava brothers, and even anti-heroes with human traits. The emphasis naturally shifted to the expression of human emotions. Consequently, emotive histrionics known as rasabhinaya gained prominence and the face assumed importance as the field of expressions.

In order to accentuate the potential for expression, the face was given a white border called chutti. This helped to confine and highlight the subtle movements of the features and muscles of the face. Similarly, to invite attention to the focal points of expression on the face – the eyes and lips - they were made bright red in contrast with the dark green of the face. The tempo of action in the
performance was slowed down and the action itself made more subtle and stylised. A rigid pattern was fixed in the following order – at first the todayam, an invocatory dance with a musical base employing all the rhythmic patterns set by the maddalam and the cymbals, followed by the purappad, an elaborate stylised dance serving as a prelude, and then the manjutara sequence from Gitagovindam sung to the accompaniment of instruments such as the chenda, maddalam, ilattalam, and chenkala. With this, Kathakali had completed the early phase of its development.

By the inclusion of plays from epic and puranic sources other than the Ramayana the Prince of Kottayam “opened up one of the fundamental performance determinants – the content of the composed texts. Kathakali came to designate that particular style of performing dance-dramas in which text and content were based on a general set of epic sources (Zarrilli 1992a: 103)”.

Regarding the influences of patronage upon developing performance determinants Zarrilli says:

In this formative period of kathakali’s development, the performance determinants, conventions, techniques, aesthetic principles, and even the texts and their sources were malleable. Early patrons and performers prior to and including the Prince of Kottayam and his senior performer/teacher, Cattu Panikkar, drew on numerous performance and literary sources in the formation of the genre eventually called kathakali. During this century, among the most important performative sources for ramanattam-kathakali, were kutiyattam; mudiyettu, which enacted the dramatic battle between the goddess Kali and the demon Darikan; kalarippayattu; and krsnattam, the devotional dance-drama based on Jayadeva’s Gitagovinda (See Zarrilli 1984:Ch.6).

Innovation in content was one of many changes made by the Kottayam Prince in the performance tradition. Among the other modifications in text and performance which he introduced himself or in collaboration with his senior actor, Cattu Panikkar, were providing ‘scope for a wider range of bhava or emotional mood’; using Sanskrit for slokas and Malayalam for padams; more careful selection of raga in creation of mood and relative place in the performance score; increasing the variety of rhythmic patterns and speed used in performance; refinements in make-up and costuming; introduction of the language of gesture (mudras) by borrowing the complex codified system of kutiyattam; and introduction of many attams of performative interpolations (Zarrilli refers to Jones 1983:22-24).
**The Period of Maturation**

Within the feudalistic structure of Kerala society there were provided optimum opportunities for patronage. The rulers of small fiefdoms remained under the control of minor kings who, in turn, were vassals of the ruler of one of the larger kingdoms. The successive layers of feudal responsibility to provide fighting men when called upon to assist in war accounted for the widespread founding of *kalari* for military training throughout the land. There was a further element of prestige attached to the establishing of *kaliyogams* for Kathakali training as an extension of the physical skills of the *kalari*. In compliance with the need for ritual purity for temple performances Kathakali actors were drawn from those males of the Nayar rank or above (Jones 1983:35). Outside of the specific actor training, others turned to the refining of co-ordination within the performance conventions. Zarrilli (1992:98) explains some of the possible motives behind adopting the role of patron:

At first, patronage must have been taken on for a variety of reasons, including personal devotion inspired by a general increase in Vaishnavite (Rama and Krishna) *bhakti* (Jones 1983:15); a means of accentuating the traditional role of patrons as protectors of the social order; and engagement in an activity appropriate to one’s status, and enhancing status and prosperity. Patronising the arts was one among many ways of acquiring ‘good fruits’ for both family and kingdom (Moore 1983:159-168), thereby helping to ensure general prosperity.

The colonial incursions into Kerala began with the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century and were followed by the arrival of the Dutch, French and English and although they brought about political turmoil, the traditional socio-economic infrastructure remained largely in place and so too the sources of patronage. It was rather the Muslim invasion from Mysore under Haydar Ali and Tippu Sultan in 1732 that wreaked greater political disturbance as ruling families of the northern region fled southward (Zarrilli 1992a: 109; Menon 1991:251-257, Jones 1983:37). On the development of British influence in the wake of the defeat of the Muslim invaders, Zarrilli says:

By the time the British vanquished Tippu Sultan, evicted Muslim invaders from Kerala in 1792 and established their own political supremacy, the northern rulers were bereft of real political or temporal power as their armies were disbanded. The area became Malabar District of Madras Presidency, governed by a British Collector. Displaced royal families who had fled the area were allowed
to return to their lands. In both Cochin and Travancore, maharajas continued to rule, but under the supervision of the British.

What is important for *kathakali* patronage in the central (Cochin) and northern (Malabar) regions of Kerala is that displaced royal lineages were allowed to return to their lands, and therefore to their place in the socio-economic order.

...In Malabar the replacement of the traditional political structure by a new one did not in any way curtail their wealth. They were supplanted, but without land reform or any threat to their ownership of property.

In the south, however, quite different changes were afoot. During the reign of Martanda Varma in Travancore from 1729 to 1758 there was considerable political change that brought with it the annexation of land, the main source of wealth. Martanda Verma conquered all of the area from Cape Comorin to the borders of Cochin, forced into submission all of the Nayar chiefs, transferred their individual land holdings to the newly created state apparatus of Travancore, wherein he had laid the foundations of modern bureaucracy. As the wealth and power became concentrated under the rule of the Maharaja of Travancore, that family played out the role of model royal patron of the arts (Zarrilli 1992a: 109-110).

Despite the political upheaval, the socio-economic unit of “house and land” was conserved among royal and Nambudiri families up until the mid to late nineteenth century so the social and economic support for traditional patronage of the arts remained relatively secure. The influence of this structure on patronage and subsequently upon performance refinement is noted by Zarrilli (1992a: 110-111):

This is evidenced even in the pre-Kaplingattu Namboodiri period as texts authored and performance refinements both characterised this movement toward development of virtuosoic nuance of expression to realise better the aesthetic sensibilities of the ideal audience – the patrons themselves.

**Kaplingattu Nambudiri**

Kaplingattu Nambudiri, who was born around 1740 at Netumbura in central Kerala, had developed a keen interest in music and theatre and was to
bring about a number of improvements to the percussion accompaniment of Kathakali. He also added to the vocabulary of gesture by the further borrowing of mudras from Kutiyattam. He provided for a more harmonious blending of body movements with mudras, the language of gesture, and bhava, the emotional condition of the character portrayed, and formalised the use of alarcca, the inarticulate vocal sounds made by demonic or animal characters. He strengthened the structure of the chutti and allowed for a three dimensional form. He refined and clarified the several make-up types of Kathakali and the elaboration of ornaments. He developed the katti as the most important role in Kathakali, recognising “the dynamic theatrical possibilities of a character in whom virtuous and ignoble qualities vie for supremacy (Jones 1983:28-29).” Of these virtuous and ignoble characters, Panikkar (1993:35) says:

These anti-heroes shot into prominence, brushing aside the gentle Pandavan heroes of the Kottayam plays and the wild monkey-like characters in Ramanattom. Amorous scenes and scenes of valour became more effective in the hands of these rajasic (dynamic) characters.

**Lines of Transmission – sampradayas**

The sampradayas are the lines of transmission from teachers to disciples. Zarrilli (1992a: 105) notes their significance in identifying performers:

Just as a member of a caste (jati) is defined by his birth into that particular group, so also an individual trained in a specific sampradaya has his entire performance identity defined by his lineage. … A sampradaya, then, is an indigenous and self-conscious method of recognising legitimately created and transmitted variation within a cultural performance tradition.

When performers were aggregated under the patronage of the Prince of Kottarakkara to enact the Ramanattom plays the first of the sampradayas was established. As variations to techniques and performance scores were developed and passed on there arose new sampradayas and by the “turn of the eighteenth century when kathakali had crystallised its technique and score under the artistic
leadership of Kaplingattu Namboodiri, three distinct sampradayas were in existence, the *kallatikkotan* mainly found in the north of Kerala, the *kalluvuazhichitta* mainly found in central Kerala, and that associated with Travancore in the south” (Zarrilli 1992a: 104).

Jones (1983:32) refers to Shanku Panikkar as the first major figure of Kathakali to blend successfully elements of the Kallatikkotan tradition with the transformations wrought by the Nambudiris and the artists of his own troupe. In so blending two major traditions he consolidated the Kalluvazhichitta sampradaya, which is “currently acknowledged by aficionados as the most polished and highly integrated form of the art”. Panikkar (1993:35), in reference to the reign in Travancore in the third decade of the nineteenth century of Utram Tirunal, notes the lavish patronage on Kathakali artistes and kaliyogams. Speaking of the four distinctive styles evolved during this period, he goes on to say:

The new “Kallivazhi style” was introduced in 1850 under the patronage of Olappamana Mana. This synthesis of the Kalladikkodan and the Kaplingadan styles was created by Unniri Paniker and later propagated by Ittirarissa Menon. The Kerala Kalamandalam under Pattikkantodi Ramunni Menon gave currency to this style in Kerala.

**The Modern Period**

This period is characterised above all by the initiatives of the poet Vallattol and others to provide for the Kerala Kalamandalam, an institutional setting to replace the collapsed traditional system of patronage of the performing arts in Kerala. In the period between 1860 and 1930 there had been a decline and eventual breakdown in traditional patronage. Panikkar (1993:38) elaborates upon these changes:

This phase may be split into two periods, 1860-1900 and 1900-1930. The first saw a decline of the art form and the second initiated a complete breakdown. Utram Tirunal Maharajah passed away in 1861. His successor Ayilyam Tirunal was more interested in Carnatic music and dances by women. His successor, Visakhom Tirunal, who ruled for a short period, considered Western civilization superior to Indian. His successors, in turn, Sree Moolam Tirunal and Sree Chitra Tirunal, were indifferent to Kathakali but continued with it because they did not
want to discontinue a tradition. Ayilam Tirunal disbanded the palace *kaliyogam* and restricted its function to staging twenty performances a year in the Padmanabhaswami Temple at Tiruvanantapuram.

Meanwhile, encouraged by the royal patronage and enhanced prestige enjoyed by Kathakali performers like Eachara Pillai, many youngsters had taken to Kathakali. Several aristocratic Nambudiri and Nair families set up their own *kaliyogams*. This meant a large number of *kaliyogams* and artistes, which naturally led to the dilution of the art. Moreover, towards 1900, the Nambudiri and Nair families started facing internal problems posed by a rebellious younger generation, which ultimately resulted in a lack of attention paid to Kathakali and diminished enthusiasm on the part of artistes. The rigours of the six-month long oil massage during the months of the southwest and northeast monsoons from June to November got reduced to three months. Plays which took four nights to perform were abridged and executed within one night. This led to the further deterioration of quality; slow tempo had lost its value. By 1920 there was a total collapse of Nambudiri and Nair families, brought about by fresh legislation. This disrupted the functioning of the *kaliyogams* and drove the Kathakali artiste to the streets where, knowing no other vocation, he was reduced to penury.

Apart from the economic and structural problems facing Kathakali by the turn of the century, “there were additional problems of changing personal sensibilities brought about by British education, especially among the Nayars”. Zarrilli (1992a: 118) elaborates some of these factors:

New forms of education and concomitant values altered indigenous perceptions of the value of India’s cultural traditions. British rule, law, and economics both directly and indirectly forced completely new institutional and organisational structures on arenas of social action such as patronage which had previously operated according to traditional social networks. Modernisation in the form of new modes of transportation, technical advancements such as the introduction of electricity, and increasing availability of marketplace commodities all placed further pressure on the *kathakali* tradition during this period.

**Mahakavi Vallottol, the Kerala Kalamandalam and Margi**

After a Kathakali performance at the Manakkulam Palace in 1922, the celebrated Malayali poet Vallottol who was in attendance discussed with Mukunda Raja of that household a plan for the restoration of Kathakali to its former high status. Together they sought out ways of organising financial support and patronage from the old aristocratic families of Kerala. They
introduced ticketed performances and they engaged distinguished actors and musicians from north and central Kerala. A lottery was organised to provide funds for the establishing of “a school for training in Kathakali and other traditional performing arts of Kerala, which they called the Kerala Kalamandalam (Jones 1983:37)”.

Those families and temples that in the past had provided the core of traditional patronage had lost the greater part of their estates to the government through the radical land reforms. Although a few smaller kaliyogams supported in the traditional manner by Nambudiri Brahmans and Samanatar Nayars struggled on, the new idea of an institutionalised setting for Kathakali training, a school supported largely by government grants and by private organisations rapidly gained acceptance as the primary means for continuing the Kathakali tradition (Jones 1983:38-39). However, institutionalisation ushered in ideas and practices that had never been a part of the Kathakali tradition: “such as continuous expansion and sheer size as the criteria of a ‘successful institution’ (Jones 1983:40).” In relation to its institutional setting and the Kerala Kalamandalam’s teacher-student relations, Panikkar (1993:41) says:

Though the Kalamandalam is said to follow the gurukulam system, it has not truly adhered to the gurukulam style except for the fact that teachers and pupils live on the campus. Like the Western system of education, it has a definite duration and syllabus-bound courses with annual examinations and the issue of certificates. It seems to have forgotten that an education culminating in acquiring a certificate does not create real artistes.

It was under the particular efforts of Pattikkantodi Ramunni Menon teaching at the Kalamandalam, at Cheruthuruthy in Central Kerala, that the institute adopted his Kalluvazhi style, which subsequently underwent some modifications to become the Kalamandalam’s distinctive style based on the Kalluvazhi system (Panikkar 1993:42-43).

Margi, funded from 1974 in Tiruvananthapuram, operates differently from the Kerala Kalamandalam. Students who distinguish themselves at the Kalamandalam may go on for further grooming at Margi in the kaliyogam style: training that is not time-bound, syllabus confined, and exam orientated. “Margi transforms them into artistes, giving them a chance to develop and ignite their technical virtuosity and aesthetic erudition (Panikkar 1993:43).”
Along with the institutionalising of Kathakali there have been other subtle changes to the patronage. Jones (1983:42) reminds us of the influence of social prestige on present-day patronage:

In today’s middle class society in Kerala, it has become socially, intellectually, and even politically prestigious to be interested in Kathakali and to attend Kathakali performances. But as Kathakali becomes an instrument of social prestige, the art itself is subtly transformed, tending to become less an art of highly formalised conventions and to show signs of a trend toward a degree of ‘naturalism’ which can be ‘appreciated by anyone’.

Zarrilli (1992a: 139), commenting on the separation of the four aspects of traditional patronage in modern times, says:

In the modern period, radical disjuncture between social and artistic roles, especially among those providing financial and organisational support, has led to separation of the four aspects of traditional patronage as one role in a role set. Connoisseurs are no longer necessarily patrons. Patrons are no longer necessarily connoisseurs. Dependency on sponsors whose performative sensibilities are decidedly pluralistic, and often populist rather than virtuosic, has led to re-constitution of the centre by fiat if not by choice …

Although the modern tradition is still constituted by *sampradayas*, these lineages are neither closely associated with particular creative pairs patron/master-performer, nor are they so clearly identifiable as in the past. Today *sampradayas* in the new institutional settings are much more diffuse collections than clear inheritances with the stamp of distinct individuals.

II. Modernity and Postcoloniality

Forging a National Identity

Within a lineal perspective the concept “post-colonial” might easily and simplistically be imbued with a notional “end” to colonialism. The term itself is perhaps suggestive of a situation that is “falsely utopian or prematurely celebratory (Ghandi 1998:174)”. Leela Ghandi, in her work, *Postcolonial Theory*, goes on to cite Anne McClintock who argues that the term “post-
“colonialism” is haunted by an unacknowledged commitment to the principle of linear time and therefore to the idea of “development” implicit to this view of time (McClintock 1992:2).”

Sanjay Srivastava (1998), in Constructing Post-Colonial India, looks at the development of national character, particularly through the elitist Public School system, transposed from Britain to colonial India, a contemporary exemplar par excellence of which is the Doon School. Srivastava’s study of that school provides clear evidence of the impossibility of either detachment from the colonial heritage or reaching some idealised replication of it. Mimicry and hybridity necessarily mark the ways in which the Doon School has conducted its national identity and citizenship dialogue. Srivastava (1998:7) argues that:

the construction of the urban post-colonial Indian identity owes a considerable debt, intellectually and philosophically, to one of the most comprehensively adapted of all British institutions in India – the public school; and that this identity has remained remarkably unfragmented across widely differing political positions (of the liberal-conservative and left-right kind), united through an abiding commitment to a modernist paradigm of being on the part of the intelligentsia of various shades.

Srivastava (1998:5) is quick to point out that there was never the expectation, in British eyes, that these instruments of civilising would lead to emulation of the ideal. “Rather, the colonial public school would pay homage to the ideal through never quite attaining its standards, never quite replicating its milieu.” Mimicry and hybridity characterise the development of this Indian intelligentsia that has been imbued with the Enlightenment values of Public School education. Srivastava (1998:11) argues that the Doon School has:

conducted its national identity and citizenship dialogue through such a ‘science’ of personality which has emphasised the need to develop the secular, rational, metropolitan citizen, and the depredations of the opposite personality-type upon the health of the civil society.

The conflict becomes one between the ‘modern type’ of personality – the light of the nation state – and the ‘backward’ psyche, forever ready to undermine its integrity.

The influence of English education can re-shape notions of national identity in post-independence India, through the agendas of Indian intelligentsia. These modern and backward types are characterised by Srivastava (1998:10) across a number of binaries: English versus the vernacular languages in etching
the arguments regarding “rationality” and “irrationality”, the “primitives” versus the “civilised”, the “secular” fending off the “fundamentalist”. He goes on to look at the “‘qualifications’ for membership of the civil society: ‘secularism’, ‘rationality’, and (to coin a somewhat clumsy expression) ‘metropolitanism’ (1998:19)”.

‘Secularism’, adopted by the urban intelligentsia as modernity’s most potent signifier, also enjoys a lasting presence in the public eye through its early enshencement at a site of considerable symbolic potency; for it appears in the opening – and much quoted – paragraph of the Indian constitution, the legal apotheosis of post-colonial citizenship (Srivastava 1998:90)

In his chapter, “Secularism, the citizen, and Hindu contextualism”, Srivastava argues convincingly that for the development of an intelligentsia within the Doon School, “one of the construction sites of the post-colonised national identity”, there is abundant evidence of the underlying premise that what is ‘secular’ is underpinned by what is Hindu. Among his concluding remarks to the chapter, Srivastava notes (1998:132):

The public expression of religious beliefs is not at issue, but rather the process of misrecognition of the religious milieu of one section of the Indian population as synonymous with that of every other. The transition has been from the first phase nationalist thought, with its ideology of India as discrete communities, to one where those who have wished to install a secular subject in its place have paid scant attention to the larger context in which the citizen subject has been nurtured. In the process, this has led to a reductionism where Hindu life ways have come to stand for all possible ways of being. This unwitting convergence between the world of the ‘secularist’ and the aims of the ‘fundamentalists’ is ironic indeed.

Pre-Independence Modernity and the Romantic

Let us briefly loop back from the current era of post-colonial India to the independence movement that saw M.K.Gandhi, a decidedly diasporic identity, return to India to lead a non-violent struggle that involved turning away from the metropolises to establish village communes dedicated to the revival of crafts, particularly by way of the spinning wheel. Leela Gandhi (1998:147) notes that M.K.Gandhi’s struggle against the British was underpinned by
recognition of the primacy of Indian culture and of the detrimental effects generated by ignoring the prevailing English language hegemony:

In colonial India, Gandhi’s regular invectives against English education revealed a similar belief in the legitimate cultural primacy of Indian literatures and languages. In anticipation of post-independence India, where English would remain the privileged language of administration and the ruling elite, he objected with some fervour to “the harm done by this education received through a foreign tongue…It has created a gulf between the educated classes and the masses. We don’t know them and they don’t know us” (Collected Works vol.14, p.16).

A.K.Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), another diasporic identity, born in Colombo of an eminent Ceylonese father and an Englishwoman of a wealthy Kent family, straddled two cultural identities and from that advantageous position wrote learnedly and prolifically, primarily on his comparative studies of art history, metaphysics and theology. His scholarly work on aesthetics has been extensively quoted in this thesis. He was largely responsible for opening up the study of Indian art in the West and articulating for a readership in both cultures a system of aesthetics that drew on the mediaeval periods of both (Lipsey 1977b). In his earlier writings, he managed to disenchant some sections of academia by what was perceived as his own unbridled romanticism in opposing industrialisation and advocating a return to village life and the revival of crafts. However, the breadth and depth of his later writings and his encyclopaedic study of the arts could not but draw admiration from even his most ardent critics. Among the latter, Meyer Schapiro of Columbia University wrote, at the time of Coomaraswamy’s death that “he was one of the luminaries of scholarship, from whom we have all learned. And by the immense range of his studies and his persistent questioning of the accepted values, he gave us an example of intellectual seriousness, rare among scholars to day” (Meyer Schapiro, September 12, 1947).

Between 1909 and 1913 Coomaraswamy made numerous trips from Britain to India where he was well established in the Tagore circle in Bengal, which provided staunch support for the nationalist Swadeshi party in Calcutta. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) “had authority in Bengal, not as a politician, although he appeared at nationalist meetings and lectured on swadeshi, but rather as patriot, poet, songwriter, and religious philosopher. The period 1901-
1914 was perhaps his most creative; the poetry of these years in English translation won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913” (Lipsey 1977b: 81).

Of Coomaraswamy’s repute in India at this time, Lipsey (1977b: 89) says:

(It was) primarily due to his nationalist writings, most of them collected into two volumes: *Essays in National Idealism*, published in Ceylon in 1909, but composed mainly of articles that had appeared in India; and *Art and Swadeshi*, published at Madras in 1911. Aurobindo had written of politics and cultural revival; Coomaraswamy wrote of cultural revival and politics. He despised “the merely material ideal of prosperity which is too exclusively striven for by our economists and politicians…Such an aim defeats itself”.

In *Art and Swadeshi*, Coomaraswamy (1911:10-12) says:

India, politically and economically free, but subdued by Europe in her inmost soul is scarcely an ideal to be dreamt of, or to live, or die for…It is the weakness of our national movement that we do not love India; we love suburban England, we love the comfortable bourgeois prosperity that is to be some day established when we have learned enough science and forgotten enough art to successfully compete with Europe in a commercial war.

According to a review of his *Essays in National Idealism* that appeared in the *The Modern Review*, a journal noted for its exposition of progressive Hindu thought, Coomaraswamy was to be regarded as “a logical and uncompromising reactionary…Yet we cannot deny the beauty and truths of the pure ideal as he so nobly and persistently holds it up before us…We think the book he has written to be of surpassing value” (Lipsey 1977b: 90, quoting from a Madras edition of the review of 1909). Coomaraswamy’s position may, in part, be explained by an excerpt from a review article of 1914 (cited in Lipsey 1977b: 90): “Before we can have India, we must become Indians…I firmly believe the only service possible to render to the cause of Indian freedom, is service to Indian ideas.”

The historian Ronald Inden, in his article “Orientalist Constructions of India”, under the heading of “Romantic India: Ideal Essences” (1986:432-33) notes Coomaraswamy as an art historian who has been prominent in promoting an idealist view of India. Inden goes on to say:

The romantic typically takes the stance not of a supporter of Western values and institutions, but a critic of them. Yet the romantic does not necessarily (or usually) accept those of the East as ready-made substitutes. Nor, as I have indicated, does he usually disagree with the positivist about what those are. Rather, he situates himself between or outside of *either*, considering both as
somehow embodying the antimonies of ‘human nature’, the extremes to which men have gone.


From deconstruction, then, postcolonial literary theory receives an ambivalent inheritance: on the one hand, it learns to glean and defend the radical energies of writing and, on the other, it acquires the habit of investing texts with values that cannot be located or fulfilled in reality. And it is here that we can begin to discern the hidden symptoms of New Criticism – that suppressed discourse which inhabits the secret enclaves of both postcolonial literature and poststructuralist literary theory. For our purposes, it is enough to acknowledge that the New Critics postulated the poetic text as a sacrosanct object, hermetically sealed from the contaminations of both rational enquiry and the materialistic world which occasioned such enquiry. Seen as such, the literary text projected an alternative – a newer, better and improved world where the privileged reader could discover a refuge from, and a resistance to, the encroachments of modern industrial society. As is well acknowledged – and here, we need to stretch our genealogy even further back in time – New Criticism is itself informed by a specifically Romantic understanding of the poetic word. And it is within Romanticism, I would argue, that postcolonial literary theory finds its particular textual provenance.

Ghandi continues to trace a logical genealogy that leads her to conclude (1998:165-66):

This, then, is the governing paradox of the postcolonial canon: that metropolitan culture has acquired a romantic investment in a literary narrative which is markedly anti-romantic in its perception of the postcolonial world. Here we can find only the language of critique; a hybridity that is predicated precisely upon an abrogation of the postcolonial nation. And yet, despite the influential liberal enmity towards nationalism, this abstract and imaginary force bears, as argued earlier, the traces of countless histories of struggles – histories which, in turn, continue to inform the ethical apparatus of countless peoples. And, as During writes, “To reject nationalism absolutely or to refuse to discriminate between nationalism is to accede to a way of thought by which intellectuals – especially postcolonial intellectuals – cut themselves off from effective political action” (During 1990:139).

Coomaraswamy’s being labelled as “Romantic” has in great part been due to his refutation of industrialism. Lipsey argues (1977:114) that Coomaraswamy’s Post-Industrial longing should be softened by his acknowledged admiration of William Morris’ nineteenth century revival in Britain of craft, from a mediaeval context, and his own experience of the craft traditions of Ceylon:

Coomaraswamy never lost his early outrage at the human conditions of factory work. His conviction that “industry without art is brutality,” a phrase
borrowed in his youth from Ruskin and never forgotten, is indeed repeated many times in his later writings, but it is the repetition of an unheard prophet, not of a man with nothing new to say.

Coomaraswamy’s critique of industrialism was unfashionable during his lifetime, but something similar has now appeared with such intensity and urgency that to call it a fashion would be too superficial. The ecology movement of our decade has made a more damaging case against industrialism than Coomaraswamy ever made, and its language is often identical with Coomaraswamy’s and Penty’s in the years before and after World war I. Even the solution that Coomaraswamy, like Gandhi, envisaged – a return to “villagism” (at least in India) – has been adopted by many young Americans through communes, while the rest of America watches their experiment in Post-Industrial living with something more than casual interest.

Orientalism and Textual Politics

Many textual mappings of the colonial experience and postcoloniality take their cue from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) (Inden 1986, Ghandi 1998, Srivastava 1998). Inden (1978:410) incorporates “the bold message of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, with the difference that I have made India rather than the Middle East the primary referent in my summary of his portrayal”. Srivastava (1998:105) refers to Said’s opus in relation to the exclusion of Muslim prayers from the assembly prayer book adopted by the Doon School and suggests that such exclusion “may be linked to the religious convictions of many of the early Doon staff and to the long history of conflict between the Judaeo-Christian and the Islamic worlds”, which has been copiously commented upon by Said and others. Ghandi, in her chapter “Postcolonial Literatures”, (1998:143) says:

Readers may recall that Said’s *Orientalism* treats European colonialism as a ‘discourse’, namely, as the project of representing, imagining, translating, containing and managing the intransigent and incomprehensible “Orient” through textual codes and conventions. It is Said’s contention that colonial or Orientalist discourse manifested itself as an influential system of ideas, or as an inter-textual network of interests and meanings implicated in the social, political and institutional contexts of colonial hegemony. In writing the “Orient” through certain governing metaphors and tropes, Orientalists, simultaneously underwrote the “positional superiority” of western consciousness and, in doing so, rendered the “Orient” a playground for Western “desires, repressions, investments, projections”(Said 1991[1978]: 8). Colonial textuality, in Said’s terms, produced the “Orient” as colonisable. Its imaginative command over the “Orient” can, thus, be read as a rehearsal for militaristic and administrative domination.

The planned dissemination of English literature, Viswanathan tells us, was intended to manage negative perceptions of empire, not only by representing colonial rule as an educational mission, but also - and more insidiously – by circulating and popularising the human face of English culture and Englishmen. In sharp contrast to the unpalatable violence of European colonialism, “the English literary text, functioning as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state, becomes a mask for economic exploitation…successfully camouflaging the material activities of the coloniser” (Viswanathan 1989:20).

When Srivastava’s study of the Doon School looks at the relationship of the members of the subordinate staff to the cultural ethos being developed and promoted by the school he finds “the elaboration of a post-colonial orientalism”. He illustrates a transference of what for the British was “a powerful metaphor for the difference between an Oriental passive subjectivity and its antithesis Occidental dynamism”, that is, the “the Indian village”, here represented by the subordinate staff. Srivastava elaborates this point (1998:110-111):

The members of the subordinate staff at the Doon School have become the contemporary carriers of the old essentialising burden, their being constructed as passive, unchanging, homogeneous, simple and childlike. And, just as “Indian” once acted as the complex site of eulogy for “British”, the subordinate staff category is part of the history through which the modernising urban middle class in India has sought to define its own identity. The strategy has been to dissimulate: to present oneself as part of a contractual world which is driven by “rational deliberation and decision-making” rather than the “lower” order existence which is still hostage to the primordiality of family, caste, and religious allegiances.

**Marxism and Postcoloniality**

Said, in *Orientalism*, is critical of Marx’s failure to regard the world outside Europe and the resultant inadequacy of Marxist theory (Gandhi 1998:71). Said (1991 [1978]: 154) cites Marx (1973:320): “England has to fulfil a double role in India: one destructive, the other regenerative – the annihilation
of the Asiatic society and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia”. Gandhi (1998:72), in a discussion of Said’s response, says:

(He) responds to this pronouncement by arguing that the Marxist thesis on socio-economic revolution is ultimately and ethically flawed from the perspective of the colonised world – first, because its vision of progress tiredly reiterates nineteenth century assumptions of the fundamental inequality between East and West; and second, because it views the colonised “Orient” simply as the abstract illustration of a theory rather than an existential mass of suffering individuals. And finally, it is inadequate because Marx follows the insidious logic of the colonial civilising mission in postulating Europe as the hyper-real master narrative, which will pronounce the redemption of poor Asia. Thus, even socialism, as Fanon writes, becomes “part of the prodigious adventure of the European spirit” (Fanon 1990:253). Or, to put this differently, colonialism becomes a practical and theoretical exigency for the fulfilment of Marx’s emancipatory vision.

Gandhi, in her discussion of the genealogy of Postcolonial theory (1998:24) acknowledges the limited regard of postcolonial theorists to Marxism, despite the wide-ranging and rigorous engagement of the latter with imperialism:

Few critics have continued an exclusively Marxist interrogation of empire and those who have are vehemently opposed to the prevailing postcolonial orthodoxy. Aijaz Ahmad, for example, has been especially vociferous in his insistence upon the theoretical and political incompatibility between Marxist and postcolonial positions. As he writes: “we should speak not so much of colonialism or postcolonialism but of capitalist modernity, which takes the colonial form in particular places and at particular times” (Ahmad 1995:7). Postcolonial analysis, in turn, rarely acknowledges a genealogical debt to its Marxist predecessors – in fact, its engagement with Marxist theory is often explicitly antagonistic. In this it is guided, albeit mistakenly, by the assumption that Marxism has failed to direct a comprehensive critique against colonial history and its ideology.

Marxist theory has, even if intermittently and oppositionally, underwritten much of the politics of Kerala since the first general elections to the Kerala State Legislature in 1957, which saw “the Communist Party of India and a few independents supported by it (secure) 65 of the 126 seats in the legislature … and a Communist Ministry under the Chief Ministership of E.M.S.Namboothiripad” (Menon 1991:313). Bitter opposition from a broad alliance eventually crippled that government amidst violent protests, police shootings and the death of fifteen people. The President of India under authority of the Constitution of India issued a Proclamation taking control of the administration of the state on 31 July, 1959. Subsequently, in the 1960’s there was a split in the Communist Party and the founding of the Marxist Communist
Party as distinct from the Communist Party of India. Successive Kerala
governments have seen, with almost pendular regularity, the alternation of
ccoalitions of varying degrees of Marxist and anti-Marxist persuasion (Menon

Postcolonial Performance

Within such a Marxist context and against the contemporary values of
postcoloniality Iyyamkode Sreedharan, poet and dramatist, whose ideas have
been extensively cited in Chapter Eight of this thesis, provides for an interesting
synthesis of the influences of Marxism and postcoloniality within the
performance worlds of Kathakali. He is outspokenly political in his advocacy
for secularism and against fundamentalism (Message of Love), forthright in his
critique of Imperialism (The People’s Victory), and, in his interviews,
expressive of the need for Kathakali and its exponents to modernise,
cosmopolitanise and embrace cultural hybridity (Kathakali King Lear).

It is the last of these plays, Kathakali King Lear, conceived by
writer/director David McGruvie and actor-dancer Annette Leday, and translated
by Iyyamkode Sreedharan, that Zarrilli (1992b: 18) uses “as the primary
eexample through which to analyse the relationship between production,
perception, and reception in a postmodern intercultural world” in his article
“For Whom is the King a King?”. In his discussion, Zarrilli takes up the term
“interculture”, adopted also by Ethnographic historian James Clifford (1988), to
designate the complexity that results from the systemic interconnectedness
bridging cultural performance traditions. In looking at European reception of
Kathakali King Lear, Zarrilli considers the problematic of spectators seeing a
performance from “outside” their own culture and the distinctions between
indigenous and non-indigenous spectators. He refers to reception theorist Anne
Ubersfeld (1982:133) who says of such situations:
[The spectator] is faced with signs which he (sic) does not understand to which he cannot give a name (objects, gestures, discourse), which do not refer to anything in his experience, or, more simply, which pose a problem for him to manufacture the relationship between the sign and its intelligibility, or its relationship to the world.

There is ample scope within the reception of intercultural performances for the interplay of cultural imperialism, for Orientalism. In this regard Zarrilli (1992b: 26), commenting on the “colonial drama of subjugation and domination”, refers to South Asian historian, Ronald Inden:

The West has a long and continuing history of manufacturing a variety of meanings for non-indigenous customs, persons, or cultural artefacts/performances it could not (or did not wish to) understand. Historically, the West took this experience of difference and encapsulated it in a series of discourses on the cultural Other. In the Western-initiated colonial drama of subjugation and domination, India was cast in several key roles. Most important, as South Asian historian Ronald Inden relates, for empiricists and rationalists that role was “THE unchangeable” and/or “THE absolutely different” (and therefore inscrutable and dominatable), and, for romantics, the “SPIRITUAL or IDEAL” Other [Inden 1986:401-46]. As the period of colonial expansion reached its final climax at the turn of the nineteenth century, this drama of subjugation and domination was played out symbolically rather than literally at the “World’s” Fairs and even at Coney Island and other amusement parks where exotic Indian nautch dancers were featured in the Durbar of Delhi. Our abilities to read, understand, assimilate, and even participate in Indian performance have been shaped by these discourses of Otherness, which feed both our imagination of Otherness and the way we describe it.

Zarrilli (1992b:36) concludes that, in distinction from, for example, Peter Brook’s Mahabharata, the Kathakali King Lear project of Leday and McGruvie “intentionally kept an active tension between a simplified Western narrative played in a fully codified theatrical and choreographic re-elaboration of that narrative”. On the contrary, Brook’s Mahabharata, is seen by Zarrilli (1992b) and Pavis (1989) to have “‘flattened’ the Indianness of the epic’s cultural markers and suppressed any use of India’s codified performance techniques”. Zarrilli (1992b), citing Daryl Chin (1989:174), goes on to warn of the need for diplomatic vigilance in an increasingly intercultural world where “the interconnections of the geopolitical structure are so intricate and so intertwined that there is no way out of the dilemma of [inter]dependence”.

In his introduction to “For Whom Is the King a King?” Zarrilli (1992b:18) discusses the inseparability of production and reception and the particular
relevance of this dynamic in the analysis of intercultural productions. He quotes
Susan Bennet’s (1990:114) assertion that “production and reception cannot be
separated, and a key area for further research is the relationship between the two
for specific cultural environments [and] for specific types of theatre”. It is a
relationship that is to be fore-grounded once again in the reading of the
historical and ideological factors that are offered above in the shaping of
productions of Kathakali.

III. Aesthetics and Emotions

Defining Aesthetics for Anthropology

It is important to see that “Aesthetics is a multi-disciplinary or inter-
disciplinary field” (Diffey, 1984:169), that is, to recognise that “we are dealing
with several different disciplines that are brought to the study of the questions
that traditionally comprise the field of aesthetics” (Van Damme, 1996:1):
aesthetics may be seen as a branch of philosophy, sociology, psychology, and so
on; but it should not be viewed as aesthetics per se. Van Damme (1996:1)
suggests then that, using Diffey as a point of reference, we might be seen to be
dealing with “anthropological aesthetics” or “the anthropology of aesthetics”
(Flores, 1985; Coote, 1989).

From within disputes on the nature of the aesthetic experience there is
constantly raised the problematic of the relations between form and content and
the ways in which they might both be cognitively mediated (Osborne, 1986;
Van Damme, 1996). Because ‘real’ aesthetic experience is seen by the
formalists as being induced by form, they regard any mediation of ‘knowledge’
as extraneous to that experience. “This, then, at the same time elucidates the
formalist characterisation of the aesthetic experience as a non-cognitive phenomenon” (Van Damme, 1996:21). In reference to the problematic raised by formalists in relation to the importance of ‘pure’ form and the question of cognitive mediation, Van Damme (1996:20), referring to Osborne, has this to say:

“A work of art is an inextricable link of form and content, substance and presentation”[Osborne, 1986:337]. It will be clear – to come back to the problem of ‘pure’ form as inducing the aesthetic experience - that if this work of art functions as an aesthetic stimulus, then the perceiving subject cannot but take into consideration the meaning signified by the work, since the latter’s semantic components are inextricably linked to its forms. Hence, by simultaneously beholding form and content the subject’s aesthetic perception will be cognitively mediated. Yet this does not imply, Osborne seems to suggest, that this aesthetic perceptual process is really discursive or that it is characterised by a relatively circumstantial cognitive or semantic analysis by the perceiver’s mind. At least, on aesthetic experience he notes that “Aesthetic percipience is, like all perception, a form of cognition; but it is direct apprehension of the object upon which it is directed, not knowledge about its object”.

Within this discussion, Van Damme raises the significant issue of discussing paired values, not in terms of a dichotomy, whereby mutual exclusivity is applied, as is the case with the formalists in regard to “cognition” and “emotion”, but rather to adopt a dualism, which allows that both aspects be considered. This point is also of particular relevance to the epistemologies that inhere to a discussion of Indian aesthetics: the dualistic “both… and” approach to linked terms will be helpful. In contradistinction, the dichotomous “either…or” approach, wherein the two terms are seen as separate, independent or mutually exclusive, would be counter-productive to attempts to co-witness Indian aesthetic and emotional experiences, particularly in one’s consideration of the functioning of the emotions and cognition. Van Damme (1996:24) says:

…characterising the aesthetic experience in dualistic yet non-dichotomous terms leaves open the possibility that the experience so described may somehow be both emotive and cognitive, or that we may be dealing with an aesthetic perceptual process which involves – still in dualistic terms – more cognitive phases and more affective ones, which may interact or become fused into something which supercedes the initial analytical dualistic distinction between cognition and emotion.

Because anthropology operates at the level of verbal discourse, Van Damme (1996:25) rightly points out that if the aesthetic experience is couched in purely formalist, dichotomous terms, whereby the aesthetic experience is
regarded as an emotive non-cognitive experience, then “empirical research into aesthetic feeling is simply not possible”. The influence of formalism in the West has inhibited empirical research on two counts: firstly, it fails to recognise that aesthetic experience has a cognitive dimension and that it can be articulated at the level of verbal discourse; and secondly, over and above these denials by the formalists, their assumptions have further “hampered (aesthetic) research by viewing this experience as being elicited by pure form” (Van Damme, 1996:26).

The aesthetic experience has also been described in terms of both emotions and cognition and such an approach is more conducive to an understanding of Indian aesthetics. This dualism is sometimes presented with the important addition that in the aesthetic appreciation the two components are fused (Van Damme, 1996:22; d’Azevedo, 1958:706; Firth, 1992:18). Anthropological aesthetics, then rejects the notion that aesthetic feeling is brought about by pure form and embraces instead the idea that it is elicited by form-with-meaning. “More particularly, from our anthropological perspective, it is implied that aesthetic perception involves the mediation of interiorised cultural knowledge” (Van Damme, 1996:38).

Three broad classifications of definitions of aesthetics are drawn by Van Damme (1996:40): the first includes those “more or less conventional ones which emphasis the study of ‘beauty’”; the second includes those that “conceive aesthetics more broadly as philosophy of art”. In this latter group one might include, for example, Kaeppler (1971:75) who notes that “art is defined as cultural forms that result from creative processes which manipulate movement, sound, or materials. Aesthetics is defined as ways of thinking about such forms”, with the latter “including the standards by which they are judged”. The third category includes the “more typically anthropological definitions that are proposed under the label of ‘ethno-aesthetics’” (Van Damme, 1996:40). Into this category falls, for example, the work of the tenth-century Indian philosopher, Abhinavagupta (Van Damme, 1996:41-42; Anderson, 1990:168) whose contribution to Indian aesthetics through his comments on the Theory of Rasa (See also Appendix Two) is discussed below.
In order to pursue the definition of aesthetics within this last category and within the ethno-aesthetic example of Abhinavagupta’s comments on rasa, one needs to follow the transcendental shift into Indian thought and allow for the metaphysics of non-dualism, wherein a mystical identity of subject and object is achievable. Pandit (1977:5) points out that such a shift also entails removing focus from the significance of cognition and emotions within the aesthetic experience and giving attention to whether it constitutes a relative or an absolute order of experience:

That which the “self” realises subjectively in the innermost essence of its being in an act of intrinsic realisation is the same as the essence of objective reality which it grasps in an act of total awareness. The conflict is not between reason and experience or knowledge and feeling but between a relative experience and an absolute experience, a lower knowledge (apara) and a higher knowledge (para). An act of intrinsic perception (darshana) is also an act of intrinsic experience (anubhava) (Pandit, 1977:5).

West Meets East: Possible Correlatives with Indian Aesthetics

The correlatives that might be useful in achieving the necessary shift from Western thinking into Indian will then be among those that provide for the transcendental within the aesthetic experience. Recovering the transcendent in Western thinking has not always been readily achievable, given the weighty influence of Rational Positivism.

In Western thinking, Kant provides for the transcendent in aesthetics and his work has been seen by Indian writers (Balram Srivastava, 1985; Pandit, 1977; Mardhekar, 1987) as providing a point of comparison. Western aesthetcian, Croce (1922:275) reminds us that “Kant always adhered to Baumgarten’s conception of art as the sensible and imaginative vesture of an intellectual concept”. But Croce goes further to point out that, perhaps despite Kant’s use of careful words to conceal his thoughts, his tendency to mysticism cannot be hidden. Croce (1922:282) regards it as:

A mysticism without conviction or enthusiasm, almost in spite of himself, but very evident nevertheless. His inadequate grasp of the aesthetic activity led him
to see double, even triple, and caused unnecessary multiplication of his explanatory principles.

Croce himself is recognised by Balram Srivastava (1985:46) as an intuitive theorist of importance “from the point of view of laying the foundation of comparative aesthetics. In his opinion in aesthetic experience the connoisseur becomes spiritually identical with the artist”. The transcendental nexus between the artist, the process and the observer, which is allowed for by Croce, is one that remains important also to an understanding of the theory of rasa.

Srivastava (1985) includes both Hegel and Schopenhauer as philosophers who provide a useful basis for comparing Western and Indian thinking. Hegel provides for a discussion of the Absolute in terms of art. Srivastava (1985:44) says:

"Art, according to Hegel is the sensuous presentation of ‘Absolute’. It is the first of the highest triad, manifested by the Absolute – (1) art, (2) religion and (3) philosophy."

Schopenhauer, moreover, according to Srivastava, makes an explicitly transcendental contribution to discussion of connoisseurship and contemplation. Srivastava (1985:45) says:

"Schopenhauer has described the transcendental nature of aesthetics and has held that aesthetic experience is the experience of idea – the immediate manifestation of ‘will’ free from all relations. It is obtained when knowledge is free from ‘will’ and the subject is unrelated with the element of individuality. It is therefore transcendental. He holds that this kind of transcendental knowledge is got intuitively by a connoisseur, contemplating on a beautiful work of art."

In further comments on Schopenhauer’s work, Western theorist, Carrit acknowledges the influence of Kant but makes the significant point that Schopenhauer’s thinking emphasises the possibility of finding beauty in everything. Carrit (1962:91) says:

"Starting from Kant, Schopenhauer, with an artistic nature probably both more impressionable and more cultivated, is forced to recognise that there are not certain beautiful things, beautiful each in its own way, but that everything in the world is capable of being found beautiful, perhaps in many different ways, if only we have the necessary genius.

Beauty then, like love, is bestowed by us, and by the perfect genius would be withheld from nothing."
The conceptualising of beauty in these universal terms may provide a useful link to the kinds of epistemologies that underpin bhakti (devotional) attitudes, which are brought to bear by on-lookers to Kathakali. Coomaraswamy, in his essay, “The Hindu View of Art”, expresses the direct link that he sees between religion and art and does not confine his observations to Hindu thinking. Coomaraswamy (1948:58) says:

Religion and art are thus names for one and the same experience – an intuition of reality and of identity. This is not, of course, exclusively a Hindu view: it has been expounded by many others, such as the Neo-platonists, Hsieh Ho, Goethe, Blake, Schopenhauer and Schiller. Nor is it refuted by Croce.

What distinguishes the whole of Indian philosophy and what, in its application to aesthetics and art, succeeds in avoiding the apparent Rationalist paradox of cognition and emotions is, according to Pandit (1977:5-6), the “pragmatic approach”: “unlike Plato, the Upanishad seers never sought to discover a concept of beauty but rather a process whereby it could be realised”. Pandit says (1977:10):

Accepting Anandavardhana’s bifurcation of the aesthetic from the logical and Bhatta Nayaka’s [around 900AD] aesthetic experience as a state of generalised consciousness, not unlike the subjective universality which Kant was to discover centuries later, Abhinavagupta built a comprehensive theory of pure feeling undisrupted by rational considerations, existing as an independent, consistent whole which soon found a kinship with the religious state rather than with the logical.

**Transcendence and Indian Aesthetics**

The formulations of the *Natyasastra* and the specific theory of rasa have been attributed to Bharata (from between 200BC and 200AD) but the development of Indian aesthetics owes much to the subsequent commentaries on Bharata’s aphorisms. The term “rasa” was borrowed from the Ayurvedic Sastras and Pandit, (1977:8) draws a comparison at this derivative level with Aristotle’s borrowing of the term “katharsis”:

Bharata’s realistic approach and eventual location of the aesthetic and artistic quality in a psycho-physical state induced by the actual secretion of bodily glands
which is not perhaps unlike the *katharsis*, is indeed derived from the medical terminology current at the time.

The problem of aesthetics is for these earliest thinkers primarily psychophysiological. This experience of beauty is an actual state of pleasure, induced by the systematic presentation of artistic form and is not an objective quality which can be inferred analytically or discerned conceptually.

It was through the subsequent commentaries by Abhinavagupta (eleventh century) and his predecessor Anandavardhana that the concept of rasa and the aesthetic experience were to be further developed. Anandavardhana’s elaboration of Bharata’s aphorism established within rasa “an emotion like a real emotion …but not an actual one. The phenomenon is not psychologically real but artistically real” (Pandit, 1977:10). However it is Abhinavagupta who remains the most important and characteristic Indian aesthetician. On Abhinavagupta, Pandit (1977:12) says:

His basic conception of art as an independent spiritual activity freed from all egoistic taints, an attitude rather than a quality, has been since the time of Kant the main postulate of Western aesthetics as well.

Freeing one’s self from all egoistic taints and establishing a condition of independent spiritual activity surely involves a degree of transcendence. The transcendence within the aesthetic experience is described by Pandit in terms that make it not only akin to the religious state but imbue it with a quality that is at least quasi-mystical. Pandit says (1977:29):

The aesthetic experience in its transcendence of ego, intellectual categories, personal pleasure, pain, doubt, hesitation and all other mental elements which disrupt its compact self-sufficiency, is a liberating experience. It frees the human consciousness from the limitations of mental inhibitions, passive or blind passions, and consequently, as Aristotle maintained with regard to the value of tragedy, it exercises a healing effect, leaving the individual spiritually soothed and refreshed.

In contradistinction to Rational Positivism of the West, the highest values in Indian thought obtain in the level of intuitive knowledge, which Pandit (1977:14) describes as:

a state of being, knowing and feeling beyond that of normal sense-perception and intellectual categories. It is essentially a metaphysical state, inasmuch as it involves the transformation of the entire personality when it comes into direct contact with the Real. It is at this level that the experience of *ananda* (bliss) is afforded. When this delight comes to the spectator through appreciation of a work of art, it is termed *rasa*.
According to Pandit (1977:12), it is through “a complete identity of the knowing subject with the aesthetic object” that the aesthetic consciousness comes about and within that process there arises “a pure expression of this here and now, filtered of all extraneous influences and ingredients”. He links this comment to the basis of mediaeval Indian thought and specifically contextualises it in the metaphysics of Saiva philosophy, within the Advaita Vedanta, that is, non-dualism.

Within this kinship to the religious state and the metaphysics of non-dualism, what distinction can then be drawn between the transcendence of the aesthetic experience and that of the mystic? Although the former is referred to in traditional texts as “the twin brother of the experience of Brahman” (Gnoli, 1956:54, note 3), Pandit goes on to characterise the aesthetic experience by the continued awareness of the mundane, even throughout its transmutation. Pandit (1977:21-22) says:

The subject in the aesthetic state while transmuting the occurrences and feelings of everyday life remains ever conscious of them whereas the mystic state marks the complete disappearance of all polarity, and the contents of everyday life are transcended. The difference is one of degree, not one of kind.

What is described here is a transcendental and unified experience and one that “consequently marks a definite break with the world; it appears in the horizon like a new entity totally unlike the states of consciousness with which we are familiar” (Pandit, 1977:24). Both A.K. Coomaraswamy and Rabindranath Tagore, in their respective writings, pursue this line of thinking. In their regard, Pandit (1977:17) says:

…they returned to the basic Upanishadic position wherein beauty is experienced as an integral part of reality and the function of art is the transformation of the human personality from a lower to a higher order. While Coomaraswamy emphasised the approach similar to that held by Christian Scholastics which makes art akin to human intelligence, Rabindranath Tagore, like the devotees (bhaktas) of India, stressed the deeply emotional aspect of art.

Coomaraswamy, to whom this thesis makes frequent reference, constantly reminds us of the touch of intellect to aesthetic experience, whereas Tagore’s work focuses on the emotions. Cognition and emotion are as the twin river banks that interactively give shape to, and are themselves shaped by, the stream of aesthetic experience, which is characterised by the transcendent. Within and
beneath this transcendental flow of aesthetic experience there does appear to be a fusion of the twin banks of cognition and emotion.

Possible Vectors of Aesthetic Experience within Kathakali

Against this background of theorised Indian aesthetic experience and in the light of the interviews of onlookers to Kathakali, one may be able to draw speculative links between those forms or formal characteristics of the performances that are experienced as aesthetically pleasing and those socio-cultural values and ideals that are articulated elsewhere, in studies of Indian culture or by more universal theorists from the West. Within the pragmatic Indian approach of discovering the process whereby beauty might be realised, within the worlds of Kathakali, and within the spectacular dimension, one might consider the affects the performance determinants of colour and rhythm in movement and also music. Outside of the spectacular, but not less significant to the integral performance, there are the framing of narrative, the influence of Brahmanic values and the wider implications of Bhakti. This list is not exhaustive but it relates, as examples, those dimensions that are raised later in this thesis in the interviews and related discussion.

Within a hierarchy of the senses, we may safely assume (Van Damme, 1996:53) that in human experience the ear and the eye are pre-eminent, but our study of aesthetics should not be restricted a priori to visual and auditory perception. Some studies of non-Western cultures have shown (Ottenberg, 1971:19; Kaeppler, 1971:177) that a dominant sense operating is the “kinaesthetic” experience (Van Damme, 1996:55), a feeling that may not only result from movement of the body, as in dance, but also from the vicarious spectator experience of this “muscular sensation”(Boas, 1927:10). There may be emotional responses that occur in the spectator in direct response to the energetic dimension of the actor’s movement in Kathakali, which may be considered quite apart from the related spectacular dimensions of colour and music.
There appears, among the interview responses in my study, no noteworthy attempt to articulate upon the affects of music. However, if the verbalising of aesthetic experience is always a difficult undertaking, the verbal articulation of the experience of music is most daunting to a non-specialist. In reference to Western philosophers who recognised the special status of music Croce says (1922:306):

As for music, that (let him who can justify the logical discontinuity) is outside the hierarchy of the other arts. We have seen how Schelling considered it to be representative of the very rhythm of the universe; differing but slightly from this. Schopenhauer affirms that music does not express ideas but, parallel with ideas, Will itself. The analogies between music and the world, between the fundamental base and crude matter, between melody and the conscious will, led him to the conclusion that music was not, as Leibiz thought, an arithmetic but a metaphysic.

In regard to colour, Western theorist Kandinsky (1977) provides an elaborate analysis of the intensely moving effects of colour on the emotions of more sensitive individuals. The superficial impression of varied colour to the eye may be considered only as “the starting point of a whole chain of related sensations” (1977:23) which have a psychic effect and produce a corresponding spiritual vibration (1977:24). Kandinsky says (1977:41):

Shades of colour, like those of sound, are of a much finer texture and awake in the soul emotions too fine to be expressed in words. Certainly each tone will find some probable expression in words, but it will always be incomplete, and that part which the word fails to express will not be unimportant but rather the very kernel of existence. For this reason, words are, and will always remain, only hints, mere suggestions of colours.

To the profound and complex effects of colour theorised here universally by Kandinsky there must be inter-layered the specific and complex symbolism of colour that appropriate to local Indian culture in the worlds of Kathakali, which does not lie within the scope of this study.

Enamel-like colours in brilliant facial make-up contribute to the direct construction of grotesque masks onto the actors for almost all of the character types of Kathakali. Pandit suggests that the use of mask and elaborate headwear in Indian theatre have a special link with the evocation of rasa. Pandit says (1977:44):
…in mythological and legendary themes, *rasa* is likely to be dispelled due to doubt and incredulity creeping into the mind of the audience regarding the authenticity of the characters playing as gods and demons. In order to overcome this difficulty the Indian theatre used the mask and elaborate headwear, so that the mortality of the actor is submerged and his immortality appears credulous (Pandit, 1977:44).

The respondents to my interviews have given considerable emphasis to the story as essential link to the understanding and appreciation of Kathakali and to the process of self-instruction towards improved performance competence. The most popular story nominated by both popular spectators and elitist appreciators of Kathakali was “The Story of Nala”; and it is precisely this story that Ramanujan takes to illustrate the importance of context-sensitivity in the appreciation of Indian narratives. Ramanujan says (1990:48-49):

> No Indian texts come without a context, a frame, till the 19th century … Texts may be historically dateless, anonymous; but their contexts, uses, efficacies are explicit. The Ramayana and Mahabharata open with episodes that tell you why and under what circumstances they were composed. Every story is encased in a meta-story. And within the text, one tale is the context for another within it; not only does the outer frame-story motivate the inner sub-story; the inner story illuminates the outer as well. It often acts as a microcosm replica for the whole text. In the forest when the Pandava brothers are in exile, the eldest Yudisthira, is in the very slough of despondency: he has gambled away a kingdom, and is in exile. In the depth of his despair, a sage visits him and tells him the story of Nala. As the story unfolds, we see Nala too gamble away a kingdom, lose his wife, wander in the forest, and finally win his wager, defeat his brother, reunite with his wife and return to the kingdom. Yudisthira, following the full curve of Nala’s adventures, sees that he is only halfway through his own, and sees his present in perspective, himself as a story yet to be finished. Very often the Nala story is excerpted and read by itself, but its poignancy is partly in its frame, its meaning for the hearer within the fiction and for the listener of the whole epic. The tale within is context-sensitive – getting its meaning from the tale without, and giving it further meanings.

This process of encompassing narrative within narrative, like a series of Chinese boxes, in which each present over-arches to a past and to a future provides a structure that is perhaps also reflective of mythical time that inheres to Indian thinking. The structures of context-sensitive narrative and mythical time may provide their own set of values to be re-enlivened in the aesthetic experience.

There are later references in this thesis to the performance dimension of theatre of the word as an extension of the Brahmanic values of local culture within the worlds of Kathakali; for some on-lookers these values will bring their
own order of aesthetic experience. The promulgation of concern with purity and pollution as ordering principles emanates, broadly speaking and with variance in space and time, from the Brahmins (Ramanujan, 1990:108). In a discussion of the Benarasi Brahmins, Parry (1985:207) says:

Indeed, Brahman culture is very much a culture of the spoken word, and a desire to dominate verbally, to render others speechless by the force of one’s own speech and erudition, is a striking aspect of the ethos of the Benarasi Brahman.

The microcosm of the worlds of Kathakali will reflect, for example, these Brahmanic values, both the concern with ritual purity and its deliverance through the power of the word, in the particular dramaturgy wrought by the semiosis of those onlookers who are attracted to those values. The dramaturgy of the spectator is creative, in terms of its individual and personal semiosis.

These two Brahmanic values of purity and the potency of the spoken word are fused quintessentially in Sanskrit, the language of Brahmanic ritual, which finds its way into Kathakali, directly in the opening slokas and indirectly in the occasional evidence of Sanskritisation of the sung Malayalam. The acceptance and, indeed, the appreciation of this dimension, even by lower caste Indians, reflects a degree of acceptance of Brahmanic values: in the interviews reported later there is the instance of a lower caste spectator who, in articulating her enjoyment of Kathakali, placed particular emphasis not only on a knowledge of the epic narratives, but on her ability to read them in Sanskrit. Ramanujan (1990:116) suggests that lower castes “have often adopted a strategy of Sanskritisation in an attempt to enhance their status” which “would suggest that they accept the system itself even though they repudiate their position in it”.

The devotional attitudes that are represented by bhakti may embody aesthetic values which extend beyond their immediate metaphysical one: they are a key also to egalitarianism, a concept that cannot be ordered and contained entirely within the metaphysical but is necessarily contagious also to the political realm. Ramanujan notes the particular appeal to lower social orders of the inherent egalitarianism of bhakti (1990:117):

Although theoreticians of bhakti may have been primarily concerned with other-worldly matters, there is no doubt that their teaching had its chief appeal among those who were low in the traditional social order, and it is hard to believe that
the religious egalitarianism they preached was not among the principle attractions of their teaching for the vast majority of followers, or that its social implications were ignored.

Bhakti can then also be viewed also as a measure of dissent by low castes from the hierarchical structure of caste-ism, in which case to the aesthetic experience it may bring emotional responses that are, in their conception of egalitarianism, not only spiritual and metaphysical but also of a social and political order.

For anthropology, the definition of Aesthetics must reach way beyond the limitations of “the study of beauty” to incorporate a much wider “philosophy of art” and local “ethno-aesthetics”. In anthropology, there should prevail an aesthetics that is clear in the acceptance of the cognitive mediation of cultural values. A plethora of such values will be mediated by a fusion of philosophy and creative dramaturgies, including that of the spectator.

Within Indian thinking, valid “co-aesthetic witnessing” calls for a recognition of another fusion, that of the processes of cognition and the emotions, and of the transcendence that characterises the aesthetic theory of rasa (see Appendix Two), wherein a nexus is established between the artist, the process, and the spectator. The aesthetic experience, not unlike the mystical one, is a unifying, liberating and blissful one, but, in distinction from the mystical, it may retain throughout an awareness of the mundane worlds, wherein dualistic responses might be summoned up and the subject might still be distinguished from object.

The field of aesthetics in anthropology cannot be restricted to one sensorial domain, nor to an epistemology or a hierarchy of the senses that is restricted to Western thinking, it must be open the widest possible interdisciplinary and cross-cultural readings of values. In his essay, “The Part of Art in Indian Life” (1977:91) Coomaraswamy says:

Sankaracarya is reported to have said, “I have learnt concentration (samadhi) from the maker of arrows.” Not only in fact does the ordinary workman, weaver, or potter, work devotedly, but - though he may not practise yoga in the formal sense of sitting in padmasana, etc. - he always forms mental images, which he remembers from generation to generation, and is so far identified with that he
has them always at his ready command, at his fingers’ ends, without need for conscious “designing”; and in that he works thus above the level of conscious observation, his capacity as artist by far exceeds what would be his capacity as individual “designer”. At the same time his work remains comprehensible, and therefore nourishing and beautiful in the eyes of all those who, like himself, still live according to the immemorial tradition (sanatana dharma), or, in other words, according to the pattern of the Year (samvatsara). Pre-eminently of this kind, for example, are on the one hand those unlettered and obscure women of the villages, whose drawings executed in rice powder and with the finger-brush in connection with domestic and popular festas (vrata) represent an art in almost pure form and almost purely intellectual significance…9
Illustration 1:
Roudra (angry) Bhima in “Duryodhana Vada”
(“The Killing of Duryodhana”) played by
Kalamandalam Balasubrahmanian at F.A.C.T.,
Udyogamandal, 10.12.’91
Chapter Two – An Approach to Kathakali Performance

Introduction

He stood aside and grabbed his feet
and tramped on them, and then firmly
mounted himself on him, and when
unnumbered devas and men looked on
he took his sword and split his breast
and with his nails did break his bones
and crushed and pulverised them to naught
and guzzled the hot red gushing blood
which like a mighty torrent rose,
and roared, and lying prone on him
filled his mouth with all that blood
that surged again like rising floods
and pulling out his entrails decked
his neck in them as with garlands
and stamped and raised dense clouds of dust
and whacked his thighs and rocked the earth.

Ezhuthachan,
Malayalam poet,
latter half of the Sixteen Century.

These lines by Ezhurathachan (in Nair, 1967:71-72) describe the same narrative passage enacted by Kalamandalam Balasubrahmanian, whose photograph appears in the frontispiece, in the terrifying role of Roudra (Angry) Bhima. This scene of merciless vengeance occurs in the Kathakali play Duryodhana Vada (The Killing of Duryodhana) which was written by Vayaskara Aryan Moosad (1841-1902). The source of this mythic narrative is Hindu India’s epic poem, Mahabharata. It recounts here the revenge of the five Pandavas against their foes the Kauravas, for the insult against their common wife Draupadi, in their having attempted, brutally and publicly, to disrobe her. The scene enacted here is the fulfilment of Draupadi’s vow that she would be avenged by Bhima, the second of the Pandavas, drinking the blood of Dussassana, the second of the Kauravas, and her washing her hair in it; hair which until that day she would grow unkempt.
Kathakali plays generally have their roots in the mythic narratives of epic and Puranic literature. The dance-drama that is Kathakali derives from ritual performance genres and also indirectly from the traditions of classic Sanskrit theatre and local martial arts respectively. However, it is not itself orthodoxly considered to be ritual performance, which is marked by ritual efficacy (Schechner, 1976b). Nevertheless some respondents to my interviews have gone to lengths to emphasis the devotional attitude that they personally bring to Kathakali, and, in at least one case, an attempt to conserve a ritual approach to it.

In his empirical study of the people of Chirakkal, North Malabar, The Sacred in Popular Hinduism, A.M. Abraham Ayrookhuzhiel (1983:163) has illustrated that the conception of the sacred is not uniform among people:

The nature of sacred rituals is not perceived in the same way by all the believers among Hindus in Chirakkal. There were two ways of thinking among them. One was to believe that rituals objectively bring about what they purport to achieve. For example, by rituals gods can be brought to be present at particular places; that rituals effectively bring about the special blessings asked for… The other tendency was to talk of rituals in terms of the Will of the worshipper and the Will of the god worshipped. The emphasis here is on the meaning the worshipper derives for himself through the medium of the rituals which includes the hope for the blessing of the power he worships. They do not believe that things offered, mantram-s and spells uttered, in themselves have a kind of magical power to bring about the desired result.

Though there were differences in their attitude to rituals, on one thing all were agreed. It was that purity of mind and a righteous life is at the heart of true worship.

In this thesis, which has particular regard for the reception processes in performance, I argue that Kathakali is contiguous to some ritual performance genres, both in the historical sources that it drew upon and in the contemporary billing that it often shares in traditional temple-festival performances in rural Kerala. The evolution of Kathakali from these ritual and classical contiguous performance genres, Teyyam, Ayyappan Tiyatta, and Kuttiyattam and Chakyar Kuttu is discussed in Chapter Four.

I argue further that this contiguity of performance genres is a factor that cannot be disregarded in the inter-textual references that popular spectators may
bring to their readings of Kathakali. Phillip Zarrilli, in his essay, “For Whom is the King a King?” referring to reception theorist Anne Ubersfeld elaborates on some of the dimensions that are subsumed into my use of intertextuality and contiguity in this context. Zarrilli (1992b:25) says:

> When *kathakali* performances of Indian epic stories are held for Kerala audiences, it may often be said with reception theorist Anne Ubersfeld that the “signs refer to what corresponds to them in the experience of the spectator. The fictional universe set before him summons up the referential universe of the spectator, that of his personal as well as his cultural experience.” In Intercultural performance, however, codes and conventions easily read by those within one culture may be opaque to those outside.

Various readings, by a spectrum of popular spectators and elitist appreciators, result from these onlookers interacting with a number of highly conventionalised and integrated performance determinants in Kathakali. However, not all of the performance determinants may be accessible to all of the onlookers. Kathakali performances incorporate brief Sanskrit *slokas* (couplets), which are then elaborated in the vernacular of sung Malayalam and in *mudra*, an elaborate performance language of gesture that is refined to its own system of syntax and grammar. These performance determinants collectively integrate theatre of the word to Kathakali, with sung Malayalam and the mudra providing a parallel translation of the narrative. But these performance determinants of the word are further integrated to the highly spectacular and energetic determinants of elaborate costuming and make-up, traditional percussive rhythms, dance and mime, eye-movements and facial expressions, all of which are also highly conventionalised.

Roudra Bhima, as shown at the opening of this chapter, had just engaged in such extravagant leaps and energetic martial bounds in order to subdue and then disembowel his foe that the rigid *chutti*, the framing component of his grotesque make-up that stands rigidly from his jaw line, was damaged. The Roudra (Angry) Bhima was distinguished from his more tranquil counterpart in the earlier scenes of the play by an exchange of actors in different make-up types. This involved a shift from *Paccha*, one of the five main classes of make-up (as in Illustration 20), to a special, but not less conventionalised type for the angry and terrifying Bhima. The elaborate preparations in the Green Room took
some hours to construct the chutti framing and the highly symmetrical and colourful patterns on his face. The whites of the actor’s eyes were reddened by the introduction of a small seed to them just before he went on stage. There, at the crucial point in the action, he managed the reddening of his mouth and hands while feasting on the blood of his foe and garlanding himself in his entrails. But throughout the entire play the actor spoke not a word. He transposed the narrative, sung in Malayalam by the musicians behind him at centre stage, into mudra, mime and dance. To enhance his performance in these determinants, he is conventionally freed from the spoken word. That role falls exclusively to the two singers, the lead one with gong and the assistant with cymbals, who stand behind him. Two drummers, on Maddalam and Chenta, two singer-percussionists and the actors are stage-managed into a conventionally structured and cohesive performance by the lead singer.

With such highly conventionalised performance determinants what then are the initial attractions of Kathakali performances to a foreigner, like myself? Someone who sits, initially, without specific cultural insights, on the boundary of this performance culture, but is, nevertheless, quickly seduced to a sustained interest, indeed to exhilaration, throughout the night-long performance? Is such a naïve foreign spectator, without even the vernacular of Malayalam, seduced, in some degree, in the manner of the local popular spectators; those who are not inculcated to the more refined conventions and hermetic determinants of the performances? How do the aficionados, the self-styled, elitist “appreciators” of Kathakali view their own involvement in Kathakali and how do they regard the participation of popular spectators? What processes mark the transition from popular spectator to elitist appreciator? These are some of the initial questions about the reception of Kathakali that prompted me to undertake a study of the reception processes of a range popular spectators and elitist appreciators in Kerala.

A wider context for the notions of “elitist” and “popular” traditions, as I use them here, is provided by Joan L.Erdman in Patrons and Performers in Rajasthan – The Subtle Tradition (1985), when she touches upon the “great” and “little” traditions in civilization with her reference to Milton Singer (1959). Erdman (1985:17) says:

In his introduction to Traditonal India: Structure and Change, Milton Singer quotes Robert Redfield’s concept of a civilisation as a “structure of tradition”, that is, a persisting form of arrangements for handing down of cultural substance (idea and its products) within a great community, the community of that civilisation, and as the characteristic processes for transmitting it” (1959:x). Civilisation, Redfield goes on to say, is a form of the relationship between these
two components of tradition: “...the great tradition of the reflective few, and the little tradition of the largely unreflective many” (p. xi). The great and the little traditions inform each other, and partake of the same cultural structure (Erdman 1985:17).

Phillip Zarrilli in his essay “A Tradition of Change: The Role of Patrons and Patronage in the Kathakali Dance-Drama” provides some specific insights to the enduring and wide popular appeal of Kathakali, along with the refinements wrought by the reflective few. Zarrilli (1992a: 115) says:

While refinement through performative elaboration, established by the symbiotic relationship between high caste patrons/connoisseurs and performers, produced the prototypical structure of kathakali which persists today, the form never lost touch with its popular roots. Refinements and interpolations were inserted within the frames of a complete performance with wider mass appeal. The more immediate and easily engaging moments which made kathakali popular with a general audience continued to be part of the performance. Certain kathakali plays have characters who are comic caricatures of real-life “types.” The court “thugs” of Prahlada Caritam are one example. Their pratfalls easily communicate with the least knowledgeable audience member. Or, whenever Hanuman appears, his half-human half-monkey antics give him an immediate and universal appeal to all members of an audience. The concluding battle scenes (at the end of approximately 80% of all kathakali plays) are always filled with heightened drama and excitement of madly whirling figures fighting to the death. The nearly deafening, yet totally absorbing sound-action-sensory surround created at the final moment of victory in battle continues to be one of Kathakali’s most popular and compelling moments ... kathakali simultaneously developed refinement and elaboration inserted into certain sections of the performance, yet maintained its incontrovertibly popular base.

In another very detailed study, that of the Kathakali play Santanagopalam, Zarrilli (1994:68) looks closely at those “pleasures which make kathakali accessible and popular with non-connoisseurs among a Malayali audience today – those elements of story, characterisation, and theme that invite everyone to the ‘ocean of possibilities’ that is kathakali performance”. Zarrilli (1994:69) concludes with an analysis of “how these popular elements are discussed within kathakali’s immediate interpretive community of actors and connoisseurs” and reports the response of the kathakali actor Margi Vijayan “who thought Santanagopalam was accessible and popular not only because its language was relatively uncomplicated but also because it was ‘a very simple play’”; and of the connoisseur of kathakali, G.S. Varyar who said that the play “‘has an everyday [lokadharmi] aspect’14.” Zarrilli (1994:69) points to the human dimension of dilemma:
Both were referring to the enactment in *Santanagopalam* of the very human dilemma faced by a simple Brahmin householder and his wife who are suffering a tremendous loss; nine sons have been born to them, and all nine have died at birth.

Zarrilli (1994:75) goes on to discuss the relationship between the Puranic source of the play and the way in which the currently performed version of the play has been shaped to enhance the popular appeal of this everyday aspect of life, here specifically by the cutting of scenes:

With these scenes cut, the dramatic narrative is focused more specifically on the Brahmin’s dilemma, Arjuna’s prideful attempt to resolve that dilemma, and the joy and devotion (*bhakti*) which comes with Krishna’s gracious return of the children. While the original story in the *Bhagavata Purana* gives little attention to the human plight of the Brahmin, the simplicity and “everyday-ness” of the *kathakali* version lies in the very fact that it focuses closely on the Brahmin’s human dilemma.

Zarrilli (1994:77) then draws on Ayrookhuziel’s study of the people of Chirakkal, *The Sacred in Popular Hinduism*, for his discussion of how “Malayalis understand and interpret a situation like that faced by the Brahmin in *Santanagopalam*”. Regarding suffering and fate, Ayrookhuziel (1983:123, 126-27) says:

> Sometimes really good people suffer, as in the case of Harischandra. Harischandra suffered not because of his *dushkarma* [evil deeds] but because of *vidhi* [fate]…
> What is to happen will happen. One cannot prevent it. It is called *vidhi*…
> *Vidhi* means the happenings in life which are beyond one’s control, e.g., the sudden death of a young person…This can only be *vidhi*.

Also among the dynamics of the “everyday” and of popular appeal that Zarrilli identifies in *Santanagopalam*, are “The Importance of (Male) Progeny and Raising the Question ‘Why do the pious suffer?’” (1994:75), “the important element of endearing humour” (1994:79), “the wide gamut of emotions” (1994:80) and the popular nature of caricatures, “created by the careful copying of the easily identifiable stereotypical behaviours of particular groups of people within the society at large” (1994:81).

The traditional views provided on Kathakali tend reflect the orthodox perspectives of an elite of the most highly educated appreciators. The elitist and orthodox views of Kathakali that are promulgated by well-informed high caste aficionados have much to offer on the traditions of the performance from the
training perspective, and from the production side. However, when reference is made in English publications to the traditional spectators, it is still largely to the reflected elitist views that provide comment on the reception processes. Zarrilli (1994:83)says:

That kathakali is an “ocean of possibilities” for its audiences should by now be self-evident. What may not yet be self-evident is the fact that all too often narratives and discourses about kathakali overvalue the educated point of view of the connoisseur and his “theatre of the mind”. When kathakali is discussed as a “classical” art (most often by Westerners), it suggests that this form is an art of the elite to the exclusion of the everyday and the mundane – i.e., that it could have little interest or meaning for non-connoisseurs. When kathakali is discussed as a “theatre of the mind” among some connoisseurs this “higher” aesthetic sensibility to be sure is drawn upon implicitly and/or explicitly to disparage the “lower”, “sensual,” “worldly,” or “everyday” appreciation of the “uneducated” – a sense of disparagement that has the potential to make kathakali into an art for an exclusive elite which might no longer be an “ocean” welcoming all.

The empirical dimensions of this study, the interviews, fill a need for direct access to the views of the broad spectrum of onlookers to Kathakali, popular spectators and elitist appreciators, alike, and not simply to the reflected perceptions of the traditional, high-caste curators of knowledge and orthodoxy. I hypothesise, and this is supported by responses from interviewees, that it is possible for popular spectators of Kathakali who have knowledge of the traditional stories to educate themselves towards becoming appreciators of the finer points of the performances through their own continued and attentive participation (See Chapter Seven).

**Organising the Field-Work**

Fieldwork, perhaps at its best, is allegory...(it) is the production of new texts and the construction of related contexts: contexts of power, interest, motivation, intention, meaning and action. (Dirks, 1993:14-15).

The contexts for my own induction to the worlds of Kathakali were those provided by the teachers and students of Kathakali at the Kerala Kalamandalam, in Cheruthuruthy. There, on my first field trip in 1991-92, as
participant observer, I spent most of my days sitting in on training classes for the aspiring actors and musicians. Otherwise, I travelled with the Kalamandalam troupe, generally to remote rural areas where they had been engaged for all night performances of Kathakali in conjunction with temple festivals; or else with my research assistant, P. Krishnan Kutty, a resident of Cheruthuruthy, to various venues where diverse Kathakali troupes performed.

My first gleanings of Kathakali were from the classrooms and the Green Rooms and the dusty Village Squares adjacent to rural temples, where the traditional all-night performances take place.

With the assistance of Asha Menon, a resident of Trichur, I was introduced to Chakyar Kuttu through its performance and a subsequent interview given me by the actor, Ammanur Madhavar Chakyar at Thiruvambadi Temple, Trichur, (23 & 24.12.'91). A local of the Kannur (Cannanore) district and final year student of Kathakali, Gopalkrishnan Nair, accompanied me and my research assistant, Krishnan Kutty, to performances of Teyyam (29 & 30.12.'91) at the Sri Ramanthali Thavuriyat Temple at Ramanthali, near Payyanor, in Kannur.

For a second trip, in 1992-93, I prepared a questionnaire that formed the basis of loosely structured interviews that I conducted, with the local assistance of P. Krishnan Kutty. These questions were designed to explore the “contexts of power, interest, motivation, intention, meaning and action” that marked the range of popular spectators and elitist appreciators of Kathakali. With my research assistant, I travelled to a range of diverse sites for Kathakali performances given by various troupes. These included the traditional rural temple-festivals, but also the Kathakali clubs in more urban contexts. All fieldwork involves a series of compromises to a greater or lesser extent and one of mine was the decision to undertake a field study and the relevant interviews without myself having knowledge of Malayalam. Onlookers, both spectators and appreciators, in the different venues were approached for an interview as they arrived for the evening’s festivities and performances. They were chosen quite randomly, within the particular venue, and invited to provide their responses in either Malayalam or English. My assistant provided the necessary
Malayalam and, in discussion with myself, also the subsequent translations of responses into English. For the purpose of these interviews we visited three rural temple festivals, at Kavasseriy (6.12.'92), Perangod (17.12.'92) and Keralasseri (22.12.'92), and three Kathakali clubs, at Mangod (12.12.'92), Trichur (19.12.'92) and Palakkad (20.12.'92), for a total of forty responses.

At Kollengode (2.1.'92), I carried out an additional unstructured interview with Iyyamkode Sreedharan, former Secretary of the Kerala Kalamandalam and contemporary writer of plays for Kathakali. His particular interest is in providing new themes, overtly political narratives on contemporary issues, while retaining the classical form of Kathakali. In this process, which is examined in Chapter Eight, he seeks to popularise further Kathakali in a dual process of direct instruction to specific aspects of the performance culture and injecting themes that he considers to be of greater populist and political significance.

The results of these interviews are distributed throughout the chapters of this thesis. The site of the interviews, whether temple-festival, or urban Kathakali club, has been provided right throughout, because the context of location has very significant impact upon the parameters of the performances and the range of respondents being interviewed. In Chapter Three I have provided a series of vignettes drawn from various sites of performances and describing the diverse conditions, programs and patrons that were encountered there.

The Partiality to Orthodoxy in Reporting Kathakali.

A field worker is necessarily restricted and subjected to a measure of partiality by the interviewees who agree to participate and to allow the interviewer into their processes of signification. The assumptions that governed choices of venues for my interviews were aimed at avoiding the kind of
partiality that had already been promulgated to some degree by the educated views of the connoisseurs of Kathakali.

There has arguably been a predominance of the views of those who not only are very highly educated in the orthodoxy of Kathakali but who are also most willing and able to provide access for researchers to their own webs of signification, particularly the Nambudiri Brahmins of Kerala. (The role of the Nambudiris as traditional patrons in the evolution of Kathakali is discussed in Chapter Five.) I depended upon the randomness of approach to individuals at various venues to provide a broad cross-section of responses. The breadth of that range, it was expected, would be greater at temple-festival performances where both popular spectators and elitist appreciators are generally in attendance. However, at these traditional sites approaches to females for interviewing were sometimes restrained by local attitudes towards social intercourse between the genders; and on one occasion the hostility of local males was inadvertently provoked by what they regarded as unseemly directness in our approaching “their women”. The Kathakali clubs, when compared to the temple performances, are elitist rather than popular simply on the basis of payment for admission but nevertheless they still provide, in their more urban contexts, a wide spectrum of younger and older, male and female, more and less experienced aficionados. These appreciators offer a range of personal opinions on their own progression in performance competence, and also on that of the more popular spectators at temple festivals.

The Nambudiri Brahmins, as the recognised curators of ritual knowledge, in as much as their caste provides the mediators of priestly functions relating to the temples, and also as traditional patrons of Kathakali in some measure, have made a major contribution to the development of orthodox aesthetics of Kathakali. Their generally high level of education in matters that are also of a more secular application, if one can validly apply such a western binary as religious/secular, along with their ritual knowledge, equips them as the most readily suitable interface for foreign researchers interested particularly in the traditional, orthodox perspectives of Kathakali patrons. The role of the Nambudiri Brahmins in the traditional social structure of Kerala (Béteille,
Zarrilli), and that of the Nairs (Gough), the caste that traditionally provided martial artists and also performers of Kathakali, is discussed further in Chapter Five. The respective castes of respondents to my questions have been indicated in all but one case. He found the traditional concept of designation by caste utterly repugnant and preferred not to be so classified. After I had completed the interviews I sought from two high-caste locals an approximate hierarchical mapping of those castes by which respondents identified themselves, within the broad traditional structure of the four major castes, Brahmin, Kshatria, Vaisya and Sudra (Dirks, Dumont, Walker). I was met with their unspoken but demonstrable reluctance to undertake the task and, consequently, the mapping of the broad inter-relationship among the castes of respondents has not been attempted here.

**Utilising the Interview Responses**

The results of the questionnaires have been selectively interspersed throughout much of this thesis to illustrate or contrast significant points raised by myself, or by theorists that I have drawn upon. I am developing a dialogue between Western and Indian theorists and the Malayalee voices of respondents to my interviews, in the hope that each may in some measure further illuminate the other. In so doing, I am mindful of Milton Singer’s remarks to the opening of a conference, “Cultural Performance as a Blurred Genre” (ed. Joan L. Erdman, 1992:24):

> (I)f you’re dealing with cultural performances\(^\text{18}\) in different cultures, you have to experience them in their own terms, but if you try to understand them in terms of the language and concepts from your own culture, you’ve got a problem in intercultural communication.

Singer (1992:25) goes on to refer to Fritz Staal (1984), “The Search for meaning: On Mathematics, Music and Ritual” who “argues that if one rite can serve different purposes, then there is no generalized meaning that it can have, but what you should concentrate on are just the structural relations of the rite”
and, although Singer finds himself “not quite satisfied with Staal’s conclusions”, he acknowledges Staal’s “very impressive study of some of the ancient Vedic rites in India” and rounds off with: “I think we have to meet Staal’s challenge, but we can only do it by studying the specific performances and rituals and trying to continue the dialectic that anthropologists have been pursuing now for almost a hundred years”.

I have sought, through the interviews, to draw out what respondents regarded as the most significant aspects of Kathakali performances and the ways in which their choices may have prioritised different performance determinants. This leads me eventually to a discussion of the centrality, for some appreciators, of the inter-penetration of performance determinants to their aesthetics.

Performance determinants underpin the enacted theme of the narrative, the story line itself, which in traditional Kathakali will very likely derive from the very familiar epics and the Puranic literature of Hindu India and consequently will have strong mythic associations. The performance determinants more particularly provide for the signification by which that theme is unfolded in performance. Those performance determinants that incorporate to Kathakali theatre of the word, such as the Sanskrit slokas, sung Malayalam and the actor’s language of mudra, elaborate the narrative in ways that are diversely accessible to the onlookers. The parallel translation between song and mudra when coupled with a good knowledge of detail in the familiar stories provides, I argue, a process of instruction, not only in further narrative detail but also in specific performance competence (See particularly Chapter Seven). I assert that Kathakali’s popular spectators can, with attentive observation, in like-minded company, educate themselves gradually to the competence of the elitist appreciateators. The respondents to interviews seem to support this view, sometimes unwittingly, sometimes with conviction (See Chapter Ten).

The highly integrated performance determinants of Kathakali include, apart from the narrated word, the traditional percussive rhythms, dance, extraordinary costuming, set patterns of facial expression and eye-movement, highly disciplined energetic responses from the actors and the vibrant colours of
the five main classes of make-up. The make-up types are readily identifiable on stage. *Paccha* (green) (Illustration 20) is for heroic, kingly and divine types. *Katti* (knife) (Illustration 6) characters are arrogant and evil but have a streak of valour in them. The *Tadi* (beard) type has three sub-categories of Red, *Chuvanna Tadi* (Illustration 7), White, *Valla Tadi* (Illustration 11) and Black, *Karutta Tadi* (Illustration 21). The first is for vicious and vile characters; the second represents a higher type of being and is generally represented in Hanuman, the Monkey-god. The third group generally covers primitive forest dwellers. Leaving aside the three sub-groups of bearded types, the fourth broad make-up category is *Kari* (black) and applies to the most gruesome figures, the demonesses. The last type is *Minukku* (radiant) (Illustration 5), which symbolises gentleness and high spiritual qualities, in sharp contrast to the preceding categories (Bolland, 1980:5-6). Only the last of these, *Minukku*, has recognisably mundane associations with the colour and forms of the human face. The others all provide grotesque combinations of bold colours in geometrical shapes with applied make-up elements that render them more of some other world, but not the mundane.

The rigidly conventional codifying of make-up and costuming provides for spectators a ready system of identification of their favourite characters. In Chapter Seven, I also use selections from the interview responses to explore the ways in which Kathakali is rendered more popular or interesting for particular individuals. This emerges sometimes according to their choice of particular familiar characters from the epics that attract them in performance and sometimes according to the character/make-up type that marks their interests, particularly for some of the elitist appreciators of the performance. The responses across both groups affirm the very particular attraction of spectacle in Kathakali as a popular dimension of performance. I think the interviews show that it is from just such an initial attraction to spectacle that the more instructional processes in Kathakali may be engaged. It is with a progression from the initial attraction to the spectacular dimensions that the slow process of familiarisation and, subsequently, transition from popular spectator to elitist appreciator may take its impetus.
In Chapter Eight I report extensively the interview with Iyyamkode Sreedharan who currently writes and produces Kathakali plays, not from the traditional, orthodox perspective, but with a deliberate intention of further popularising the genre and bringing to it contemporary themes of an overtly left-wing political nature. His work continues to be controversial to traditional orthodoxy and his interview confirms some of my own perspectives on the popular aspects of more traditional performances. He goes on to illustrate how these traditional, popular dimensions of Kathakali can be exploited towards overtly political and populist ends, which, he hopes, will combat what he refers to as fundamentalism. The kind of fundamentalism to which he refers characterises not only the religious disharmonies of inter-community relations, which we have all seen in India’s recent history, but also the orthodox aesthetics of Kathakali performances.

Extensive use of the material from all of the interview responses is made in Chapter Nine to explore degrees of sacralising and secularising (Coomaraswamy, Dirks) of Kathakali performances within the reception processes of individuals. In Chapter Eight the interviews are widely used to illustrate aspects of cultural competence (Bourdieu) which are specific to developing an appreciation of Kathakali.
Chapter Three - Patrons, Venues and Programs

Politics does not assume happiness, nor does it give meaning to things. It creates or it refuses conditions of possibility. It prohibits or it allows; it makes possible or impossible. It is offered here from this point of view, insofar as cultural action collides with the interdictions that the powers set forth in silence.

De Certeau, 1997: 118

Introduction

De Certeau here speaks of the subtle processes that constitute political action within cultural choices, for example, festivals and performances, which may involve “exclusions that excommunicate participants, or eliminate the presence of new forms, or withdraw connections that necessarily tie it to everyday life” (De Certeau, 1997:118). These kinds of choices are sustained by the chosen venues for performances, by the factors that determine access to them, by the selection of programs offered therein and by the selective focussing that potentially occurs on one performance determinant over another within the coherence of the performance.

In this chapter, I apply De Certeau’s reference to “powers set forth in silence” to the sites provided for various Kathakali performances. This chapter is organised on sub-headings that are direct references to specific sites provided for Kathakali performances. Each provides a different relationship between patrons and programs and spectators and appreciators. Each venue carries its own silent political references, some more religiously implied by temple association, some more secular and contextualised in the pompous circumstances of grand civic architecture, others by the more exclusive or private nature of their patronage. Patronage (True Jones 1983, Zarrilli 1992) is linked closely to site and together they relate closely to program choices, the themes to be unfolded in performance, and who shall attend them. They also determine the kind of aesthetics that will be promulgated and the kinds of scenographic spaces that enable the performances; these in turn impose their
own parameters on the performers and their interaction with the onlookers. Architecture can limit and impede performance design, artistry and artifice. The implications of site and architecture on the performances may not be explicitly politically motivated but they nevertheless produce political effects. They make statements about social hierarchy, elitism or populism, and moral, ethical and aesthetic conservatism or liberalism. They establish in-groups and out-groups.

Although De Certeau points out that politics does not give meaning to things, the performance outcomes that are sustained by selective expressions of power provide diverse performance contexts; and connotation may be drawn from context. The venues for performance and the patrons present in those performance spaces provide for contextual meanings. The social trappings and the sacral or secular rituals that attend the performances provide for diverse readings of aesthetical and political agendas, which can be aligned on a continuum, designated here perhaps popular/elitist, or sacral/secular. “Generally speaking the cultural operation might be represented as a trajectory relating to the places that determine its conditions of possibility. It is the practice of a space that is already constructed when it introduces an innovation or displacement”(De Certeau, 1997: 143).

In this chapter I describe some of the distinctive elements that can be identified in moving from one performance space to another, from one patronage to another. These translocations often provide choices in programming that are themselves a key to the popular/elitist or secular/sacral dimensions of the patronage. I make references to the programming choices as a narrative text, but also as a performance text. I refer variously to the particular energies and strategies employed in the enactment of those narratives, the identifiable focuses on particular performance codes, that is, the music, singing, mudra, costuming and so on, and their contribution to highpoints of the performances; and the responses of the popular spectators and elitist appreciators to them. Aesthetic enjoyment presupposes familiarity with the internal logic of works, which is to say that “a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is the code, into which it is encoded”(Bourdieu, 1984:2). Bourdieu points to the
hidden conditions for recognising the style characteristic of an historical period, a school and so on, but the choices that constitute or reconstitute performance also bear with them the connotation of their particular politics.

**Kettaya, Palghat District, 1.12.1991**

The temple committee has arranged for the Kathakali troupe of the Kerala Kalamandalam, the State Training Centre for Performing Arts, to travel from its campus at Cheruthuruthy, Trichur District, for a temple-festival performance to celebrate the god Ayyappa. The troupe consists of the highly regarded and experienced Kathakali performers who teach at the Kalamandalam and a few of their apprentices, the senior students who will be responsible for preparing make-up pastes for their masters in the Green Room and filling minor performance roles themselves on stage. The rigid discipline and complete respect that is demanded and given between masters and apprentices, even within the institutionalised setting of the Kalamandalam, reflects the traditional training relationship that existed in earlier times. Then it was located in private households where masters passed down their performance traditions, in familial contexts, often between maternal uncles and nephews.

The Kalamandalam troupe’s bus, having travelled for an hour and a half, arrives by narrow country road, deep in the countryside at an apparent island of solid land and tall trees rising out of the vast patchwork of surrounding paddy fields. These are criss-crossed by their grids of grassy borders that retain the water and enable precarious footpaths through the muddy fields. Small groups of locals in file-formation make their way across the watery landscape towards the temple and the fair-ground stalls that now surround it. It is five in the afternoon and the bus moves at snail’s pace through the joyful milling locals who throng about the stalls for tea and snacks, sweets and sugar cane, nuts and puffed rice, and ambulant sellers of balloons, whistles and brightly coloured plastic toys (Illustration 2). Above the high walls of the temple compound can
Illustration 2:
Kettaya Temple Festival, Palghat District –
outside the temple, late afternoon, 1.12.’91
Illustration 3:
Kettaya Temple Festival, Palghat District –
elephant circumambulation inside temple
compound, 1.12.’91
Illustration 4:
Kettaya Temple festival, Palghat District –
Expectant crowd before curtained stage
scaffolding adjacent to temple, 1.12.'91
be seen the mahouts who guide the three caparisoned elephants in circumabulations of the inner sanctum (Illustration 3). Immediately adjacent to the temple a scaffolding has been set up to provide the canopy above the earthen stage for the Kathakali performance, which will take place from about nine at night until the first pink and gold light of dawn streaks the dark sky (Illustration 4). The Green Room will be established by the troupe in one of the external buildings belonging to the temple complex, a shelter on the steep steps that lead down to the wide-open tank where devotees carry out ritual ablutions before entering the temple compound. Access to the performances arranged by temple-festival committees is open to all and gratis.

The pre-arranged program consists of Nala Charitam – the Fourth Day and Bali Vadha:

Nala Charitam – the Fourth Day, the last in the cycle of four plays written for performance over four days is to be performed with all six scenes. The characters are as follows:

- Damayanti, wife of King Nala (Minukku make-up type) - played by Kalamandalam Rajasekra (Illustration 5).
- Kesini, companion of Damayanti (Minukku) - Kalamandalam Shivadasa (Illustration 5).
- Bahuka, the disguised form of King Nala (Paccha, but with blue-black skin) - Kalamandalam Balasubrahmanian.

This, the culminating play of the cycle, provides for recognition and reunion after long suffering in exile and abandonment, the outcome of a honeymoon of delights lost in a beguiled game of dice; and the reconciliation of loving consorts, after doubts of infidelity or betrayal. Essential to this process of twin-souls rediscovering each other has been the transformation of King Nala into the form of Bahuka, after having been bitten by the divine serpent Karkotaka; and now the restoration of his original royal form in the final scene of this the Fourth Day:

Damayanti sends for Bahuka who goes to meet her. When they meet, he upbraids her for thinking about taking another husband. She assures him that this was only a ruse to make him come to her. He is doubtful and cannot decide what to do, so he puts on the magic cloth given to him by the serpent (see Nala
Illustration 5:
Damyanti, wife of King Nala and Kesini,
her companion (Minukku make-up type)
Kettaya Temple Festival 1.12.'91
Charita – Third Day), and thus regains his normal self. Damayanti prostrates herself before Nala but he turns away. He then hears a voice from the heavens saying that Damayanti has remained pure in thought and deed. Greatly relieved, he embraces her. Nala and Damayanti are reunited. (Bolland, 1988:115)

Unnayi Warier (1675-1716) wrote this play. It is based on the story of Nala, King of Nishada, which is told in twenty-eight chapters of the Mahabharata. The sage Brihadaswa recounts it to the Pandavas while they are in exile and feeling sorry for themselves. In so doing it was the sage’s intention to illustrate that others had suffered far greater misfortunes in exile than they were undergoing. Another message is, of course, that dutiful love and fidelity in right-living persons will eventually prevail over the most abysmal suffering and misfortune.

The spectacular transitions in Kathakali, wrought by magical garments, potions or weapons, or else by the manifestation of gods from their mundane disguises to their recognisable cosmic forms, provide for fluid boundary conditions. They provide for the transgression of mundane reality and the transcendence of mythic truths. In performance they provide elements of great popular appeal.

The very location of the performance, its immediate proximity to the temple, along with the wider context of the temple-festival and the patronage provided by the festival committee, are necessarily closely associated with this popular appeal and enjoyment. Performance popularity is thus also unobtrusively harnessed to populism. The festival and its incorporated performances also represent a silent affirmation of the organisational power of the temple and its centrality to one networking of this rural society. The traditions of temple governance are thus also associated with popular enjoyment. At the same time the politics of the status quo are re-affirmed, in time-honoured tradition, through the cyclical, calendric nature of these festivities. The politics of change, or the possible need for change, are not elicited in this celebration of the god. The silent political context “refuses conditions of possibility” of change.
Illustration 6:
Ravana, the wicked King of Lanka
(Katti make-up type), Kettaya Temple Festival
1.12.'91
Bali Vadha is a play of nine scenes, all of which were performed on this occasion, but the character of Hanuman, the monkey god, was cut out. According to Kalamandalam Balasubrahmanian who headed the troupe, Hanuman’s role in this play was “not significant” and, besides, he had his “part to play in other stories”. The characters are:

Ravana, the wicked King of Lanka (Katti make-up type) - played by Kalamandalam Vijain (Illustration 6).
Maricha, uncle of Ravana (Katti with Black Beard) - played by a student.
Rama, eldest son of King Dasaratha (Paccha, with Muti head-dress) - Kalamandalam Krishnakumar.
Sita, wife of Rama (Minukku) – Kalamandalam Sajit.
Lakshmana, younger brother of Rama, (Paccha, with Muti) – student.
Sanyasi, a hermit, really Ravana in disguise (special make-up) – student.
Jatayu, a giant bird (special make-up) – student.
Vatu, a Brahmin boy, really Hanuman in disguise (Minukku) – student.
Sugriva, brother of Bali (Chuvanna Tadi) – Kalamandalam Udaiyen.
Bali, King of Kishkanda (Chuvanna Tadi) – Kalamandalam Ramdas (Illustration 7).
Tara, wife of Bali (Minukku) – student.
Augada, son of Bali (Minukku, with monkey mask) – student.

Kottarakkara Tampuran (1555-1605) wrote Bali Vadha, which has its origins in the Ramayana. Bali, who ruled Kishkinda, the land of monkey-men, opened up a long and bitter dispute when he seduced the wife of his brother Sugriva. However, with the assistance of his counsellors, headed by Hanuman, and the recounted knowledge of a sage’s curse which prevented Bali from entering the hill of Rissyamuka, Sugriva, at last found refuge from his constant encounters with and defeat by Bali. From this refuge he eventually enlisted the help of the two brave young men, Rama and his brother Lakshmana, who were first vetted by Hanuman, the monkey god, in disguise, and then escorted to Sugriva. It was Rama’s arrow that eventually killed Bali, but not before the final encounter between the two embittered brothers, Bali and Sugriva, in the final scene of this play.
Illustration 7:
Bali, King of Kishkinda (Chuvanna Tadi make-up)
Kettaya Temple Festival), 1.12.'91
Scene 9. SUGRIVA and BALI. They all set out for Bali’s palace, where Sugriva challenges him to a battle. Bali cannot believe his ears: Sugriva, whom he has always considered to be a coward, is challenging him to a battle. In the terrible fight that ensues, Sugriva is unable to match up to Bali’s strength. He runs away with Bali on his heels. (Bolland, 1988:96)

Kathakali structure provides spaces for improvisation from the actors, in which the lead singer, for that period, withdraws from the co-ordinating role of stage-management. It is his constant role to determine and conduct the duration, repetition and rhythms of singers, percussionists and actors who, in parallel, are unfolding the narrative in sung Malayalam and enacted mudra, the language of precise gestures. In this scene, there are two noteworthy spaces of improvisation in which the two actors provide routines that have been well developed over successive performances in the same roles and opposite each other. My own inter-textual references, from outside this cultural tradition, raise slapstick associations with comical routines from Commedia dell’arte or Abbot and Costello. As both Bali and Sugriya belong to the Chuvanna Tadi, Red Beard, make-up type (Illustration 7), they are permitted, certainly not to speak, but to emit sounds of a super-human or bestial nature.

In the first sequence the two characters engage in symbolic battle while seated on the floor of the earthen stage, symmetrically just off centre to the left and right, mirroring each other and facing the spectators. In mimicry and parody, they reflect each other’s actions and sounds with Bali always gaining just a marginal advantage over Sugriva. In the second sequence, Sugriva leaves the stage and cuts a swathe through the spectators, on an axis at right angles to centre stage, forcing them physically to move their bodies and their mats. With Bali at centre stage still and Sugriya among the spectators, the dispute continues with Bali clearly dominant. In both of these improvisation spaces, as is permitted by the conventional structure of Kathakali, there is no vocal accompaniment, but the percussion continues to punctuate the actions of the actors.

It is the arrival of Rama and Lakshmana that signals the closure of this improvisation space and a return to the engagement of all performers under the
co-ordination of the lead singer. Rama fires an arrow that strikes Bali to the ground. This “deus-ex-machina” device is one that gives the epic narratives great popular appeal. The trickery and the “unexpected” reversal of fortune, even though they have been familiarly recounted innumerable times for the local spectators, with successive re-telling, elaborate their own appeal. In terms of performance strategies, the actors’ creation of an axis of action out from the stage into the spectators, to their great disruption, might also be seen as a performative extension of the fictional spaces created by their performance. Safe spaces are transformed; mythic action appropriates the mundane. Battle, whether rendered symbolic and humourous, as in this performance, or in the action of frenzied dance steps, has its own popular appeal; slumbering spectators in the early hours of morning stir themselves from their sleeping mats in the dust for the familiar fight.

Participation by the local populace as spectators in the night-long performance provides for an additional dimension of local community bonding, within the shared values unfolded by familiar Puranic stories. The highly popular dimensions of performance are here also contextually reaffirming, by way of its association as patron and organiser and the contiguous space, the traditional values promulgated by the temple. The popular also serves a populist end: the politics of temple-centric organisation of the local community. Embedded in the popularity of the familiar stories there is to be found both the potential for populist appropriation and manipulation and the politics of stasis that accompany tradition.

**Levancheri Temple, near Kolankord, Palghat District, 7. 12. 1991**

The invitation to perform at this temple was extended, in customary manner, by way of an agent, on behalf of the temple committee and accepted by Kalamandalam K.M.John on behalf of a group of performers who have come together as a private troupe for the occasion. As is customary outside the
institutionalised setting of the Kalamandalam, the actors make their way individually and by public transport to the remote rural site. They carry only the barest of essentials to see them through the night, perhaps a spare dhoti or a lungi to serve as clothing or covering sheet for a snooze in the Green Room. The temple committee will provide their evening meal before the performance. It will be shared by the troupe communally, seated in line on the floor in traditional manner, and served on banana leaves. The actors have been chosen for their particular skills in a character-type and their reputation for a particular role in the evening’s program. They come together for this particular program, probably having worked together before, possibly even on those same scenes that will be performed this evening; but not necessarily so. Such is their training and their respective repertoires of characters that they have been prepared to work without rehearsal, with actors never before encountered on stage, or to cope with last minute and unforeseen changes to the program. The program determined for this night consists of excerpts from three plays: *Lavanasura Vadha, Putana Moksha* and *Kirata*.

*Lavanasura Vadha* is a play that is written in four scenes, but very often it is only the first scene that is performed; and that is the case on this occasion. The play is based on a segment of the *Ramayana*, although this first scene provides only a very tenuous contextual link to the main action of the play, which on this occasion does not unfold. However, the devotees are very familiar with both the main and the subordinate themes that connect this tale to the epic. The characters for this first scene are only two:

- **Mannan**, a washerman (Minukku make-up type); and
- **Mannati**, wife of the washerman (Minukku).

Palakkatt Amritta Sastry (1815-1877) wrote the play and set it in the context of Rama’s treatment of his wife and queen, Sita, when scandalmongers whispered that he should not have taken her back because she had been touched by the rakshasa (a race inimical to humans) Ravana. This was after Rama had fought and killed Ravana and rescued his abducted wife from Lanka during the fourteen years of exile. It was then on their return to Ayodhya that they had been crowned king and queen and it was then that the gossip started.
Scene 1. MANNAN and MANNATI. A washerman’s wife returns home after staying with her mother, but her husband suspects her fidelity, thinking that she has gone to see her lover. As the curtain rises, the washerman is beating his wife. She runs away to escape from his blows. There is an angry scene in which he drives her out of the house saying “I will not take you back as Rama took back Sita”.

[This remark was reported to Rama. Although he had no doubt about Sita’s chastity, he decided that he would discard her. He felt that a king should submit to the will of his people…]. (Bolland, 1988:100-101)

This scene lasts for about seventy minutes and, with great symmetry of movement back and forth across the stage, it elaborates wife-beating and domestic abuse. Both actors are in Minukku make-up, but their costuming is very mundane (the female character is in a sari) and they are clearly distinct from the more elevated characters of Kathakali that might otherwise appear in this category of make-up, as Brahmans, or consorts to the gods, for example. From my references from outside this performance culture, there is again a very strong resonance of the slapstick humour of Commedia dell’arte. The spatial symmetry of the beating is mirrored in performance symmetry of reciprocity: the brute force of the male offset by the winning dignity and nimbleness of the female. There is another layer of reflected symmetry to this performance and it is across the cordon of gender demarcation among spectators: the men express their great amusement at the elaborate wife-beating, the women murmur their support of the wife standing her ground with great dignity.

The writing of this scene of action into the play reflects a deliberate choice to attract popular response by the playwright; its inclusion in a temple-festival program, in isolation from the rest of the play, is an even more resounding strategy to engage popular appeal. The possible political message of gender issues may be contextualised variously by individual spectators: possibly in contrast to or from within the traditional role of women in a patriarchal hegemony; the traditional matrilineal power in Nair domestic relations, now largely usurped by Land and Marriage Law reforms; the moral imperative of marital fidelity; further elaboration of male perspectives on the female libido. My own research leads me to accept that regardless of the interpretations that spectators may to bring to and draw from these diverse contexts, the humour
(Pirandello, 1993) of the performance is well sustained by political issues that are potentially controversial.

Pirandello’s particular use of the term “humour” (l’umorismo), makes a strong demarcation between what is initially registered by the spectator as comic behaviour and the subsequent condition of humour. With the spectator’s first awareness of what is contrary to the norm, in the given situation, (avvertimento del contrario) one laughs spontaneously at the comic. However, upon reflection, there then follows a second level of response: when one arrives at the very serious nature of the situation that is to be discovered within and beyond the comic dimension. This level of feeling produced by reflection upon the contrary nature of the situation (il sentimento del contrario) unfolds the pathetic aspect of the situation, and therein lies the Pirandellian notion of humour. In this Kathakali play the almost slapstick nature of the comic performance is sustained repetitively for seventy minutes. There is very ample time for the spectators reflectively to penetrate the comic and discover the humour. The pathos of the humour in this case of sustained wife-abuse may be read diversely by individual spectators, but the politics of Hindu patriarchy cannot escape scrutiny at some level.

Putana Moksha brings to the stage the popular appeal of further transformations: the demoness Putana, who goes about her dreadful mission of baby-killing in the guise of a beautiful damsel, is brought undone by the universally popular Krishna, avatara of the god Vishnu. Krishna is quintessentially a mercurial figure; and here his appearance as a vulnerable, unweaned baby, exposed to the poison-smeared breast of the beautiful Putana, provides for a reversal of roles in cosmic proportions. The sucking infant drains his would-be assassin of life force and transforms her into her demonic form. But the touch of the child Krishna also guarantees her salvation (Moksha). The source narrative from Bhagavata Purana goes on to recount how the people of Gokula dismembered her body and burned it, but only the sweetest perfume rose from her smoking bones, pervading the entire city and denoting the purification wrought by Krishna’s touch.
Aswati Tirunal Tampuran (1756-1794) wrote *Putana Moksha*, but nowadays only the final scene of his play is performed and it is widely and familiarly known as a one scene play with only one enacted character, Putana, as the infant Krishna is represented by a child’s doll (Bolland, 1988:61ff). However, the third-person-to-first-person narrative shifts by the actor extend the enactment to include glimpses of Krishna. The transformation from the beautiful-damsel disguise to the demonic form can be achieved by the clever substitution of one actor (Minukku make-up type) by another (Kari make-up). In many performances the single actor achieves the transition by surreptitiously blackening his face and dishevelling his tresses, on stage, during the transformation.

However, in this performance the transformations and the dissolution of boundaries of reality are not confined to the narrated text. The actor’s skill as mime artist embodies a series of very convincing transformations inter-layered one to the other as the narrative unfolds. The male Kathakali actor playing the beautiful female (Minukku) mimes out the evil intentions of the demoness and, in a process characteristic of Kathakali performance, fluidly shifts from third person to first person narrative in the miming: male actor, playing beautiful female, mimes intentions of demonic counterpart and actually becomes the pursued child-victim. At one stage he/she sits on the floor and like an infant, with perfect agility, puts his foot into his mouth. The trickery and the mercurial dissolution of boundaries are at play in both the narrative and the performance processes, here embodied in the actor.

An essential element to the eventual, prolonged agony of the demoness is her realisation of the invincible power of the divinity embodied in the innocent infant. The popular religious message for devotees is strongly reinforced by the contexts in which the performance is enacted. It is sponsored by the temple committee and enacted on a stage immediately adjacent to the temple. The stage is surmounted by a light-box that bears, in Malayalam, the inscription “God is Love”. And all of this takes place in the Village Square, where the shrine of the sacred Arl tree dominates and where children in anticipation had laid out their mats before the stage by mid-afternoon. From that time until the first drum
notes of the evening devotional songs had been blaring over loudspeakers to fill the square and the village.

There is a reaffirmation of communal ties that takes place in the social event of sharing the night-long performance and it is clearly located in the context of shared religious values being promulgated by the adjacent temple, whose committee is organiser and patron of the performance. The site of the Kathakali performance is on a sacral trajectory that extends from within the adjacent temple to the shrine of the sacred Arl tree at the other limit of the square. The quotidian social space of the square is here fused with the sacral trajectory from the temple space to the Arl tree and that of the popular dimensions of the performance space; by association, the cyclical, calendric nature of the performance event and the temple’s authority underpin the performance with the politics of stasis.

*Kiratam* was written by Irrattakulangara Rama Warier (1801-1845) and is drawn from the *Mahabharata*. The Pandava brothers and their common wife Draupadi are experiencing the hardships of exile in the forest. The sage Vyasa advises Arjuna to go the Himalayas and do penance to the god Shiva in order to get from him the divine arrow *pasupata* that will be utilised in the forthcoming war against the Kauravas. To put Arjuna to the test, Shiva and his consort Parvati, disguise themselves as hunters. After the contrived dispute over the slain boar, Arjuna is defeated but continues, nevertheless to worship Shiva. It is then, in this third and final scene, that the great transition of Shiva and Parvati from the hunter and wife to their cosmic forms takes place (Bolland, 1988:35ff).

The characters are:

- **Arjuna**, third of the Pandavas (Paccha make-up type)
- **Kirata**, a hunter – Shiva in disguise (Karutta Tadi, Black-Beard)
- **Bhutases**, three imps19 (Special make-up)
- **Kiratatree**, the hunter’s wife, Parvati in disguise (Special)
- **Shiva**, a god (Pazhuppu)
- **Parvati**, wife of Shiva (Minukku)
Once again in this play, an axis at right angles to the stage, as in *Bali Vadha*, takes the actors storming through the space occupied by spectators and their mats, but from behind, in the hunter’s pursuit of the boar. In performance time, this re-awakening of the slumbering spectators occurs about an hour before dawn's light streaked the sky. Then, in the final scene, after the lengthy and heated exchange of words between Arjuna and Shiva-as-hunter, there develops a physical combat over the slain boar, despite the intervention of Parvati as Hunter’s wife. Successive degrees of defeat throughout the battle do not dissuade Arjuna who is eventually cast to the ground while fighting bare-fisted. The hunter and his wife, well pleased with Arjuna’s display, then move aside and Arjuna, slowly regaining consciousness again begins to worship Shiva, offering what flowers he can find. He then recognises that the very flowers that he has been offering in devotion to Shiva are the same that decorated the hunter. Cognisant of who it is that he was fighting, he asks forgiveness of the hunter. The hunter and his wife then disappear and in their place are revealed Shiva and Parvati. He then consigns the divine arrow to Arjuna and she the bow, which the goddess Ganga had taken away from him during the fight.

By convention, major changes of make-up and costuming involving manifestations of the gods take place when two attendants raise the hand-held curtain, diagonally across the back corner of the stage to the spectator’s left. Behind the curtain an exchange of actors takes place and a small stool is used for elevation of the god. The *pazhuppu* make-up used for Shiva is similar to the Paccha characters, as is the golden crown (*kirita*) that he wears; however, his face is not painted the characteristic green of Paccha but rather an orange-red *pazhuppu* (ripe). Devotion is rewarded with abundant divine gifts, not least of which is the revelation of the gods in their cosmic form.

In the interviews, one of the respondents explicitly states that in Kathakali performances spectators “are given the power to see and understand the divine images”. In such an instance, for the particular subject, the religious and devotional aspects of the performance may overshadow the more silent political implications that are inherent to choices regarding venues, patronage and
programs. Nevertheless temple-centric organisation of rural life sustains a political order as well as a religious one. The appropriation of popular performance to the politics of populism by the temple committees fulfils a function of political conservatism, which is embedded in religious conservatism.


This venue for performance stands in contradistinction to those of the two village temple programs described above. Both venue and patronage here are more secular, in their physical dissociation from the temple space and its adjacent square and also in its removal from the temple as organiser and patron. The patronage is more elitist in its connoisseurship. MKK Nayar, whose name the venue bears, was renowned as a patron of the performing arts and as an industrialist. He harmoniously combined these two roles to the extent of developing an industrial complex that included schools, a theatre and direct patronage for the training of a Kathakali troupe. Although in latter years the facility for directly developing Kathakali artists at F.A.C.T. has been dropped, the patronage of other troupes in performance at the F.A.C.T. auditorium continues to be fostered.

The performers travelling in the bus of the Kerala Kalamandalam to this program very directly expressed the different expectations that would greet their performance at F.A.C.T. They were very aware of the middle-class elitist perception of Kathakali that frowns upon the more popular slapstick scenes of Kathakali or the highly energetic battles. The actors generally acknowledged the increased level of nervous excitement that they felt in anticipation of the highly competent gaze of this elite body of appreciators of Kathakali.

There are a number of secular elements that mark the venue and patronage of this program from the temple-festivals described above. The very timing of
the program, which is to begin in the late afternoon and finish at a comfortable hour, well before midnight, dissociates the performances from the traditional program cycle designed to finish at the first dawn light. The auditorium, with its fully equipped proscenium-arch stage and electrical lighting system, shuts away the players, their characters and the spectators from any connection with the nature’s realm and its rhythms. The metre high stage is necessarily at some distance from the first row of movable chairs in order to enable clear sight lines. However, the flood of light from the stage to the darkened auditorium spills over the first few rows of chairs. The small group of appreciators, nowhere near half-filling the capacious auditorium, take their seats in the penumbra beyond this line, distancing themselves still further from the stage and cheating the actors of that preferred proximity to their spectators.

In traditional settings prior to the arrival of electrical generators, the traditional brass oil lamp stood tall enough to illuminate the actors but leave their legs in shadow. Spectators were then drawn like moths within close proximity of the flickering lamp, which nowadays still stands at centre stage front, symbolically lit for the duration of the performance, regardless of electrical lighting. The traditional tamped earth stage of about twenty centimetres in height had a functional impact upon the design of the actors’ skirts. That effect is lost on a proscenium-arch stage such as this, where spectators gaze up at the legs and underskirts of the actors. With electricity and proscenium-arch stages, leggings have subsequently been introduced to the costuming. The choice of seating at some distance from the stage in this auditorium may have reflected also an attempt by spectators to minimise the visual distortion by line of sight in relation to costume design. From the auditorium seats to the metre-high stage, the inevitable view of underskirts and legs provides a rather inverted vision of the traditional stage and oil-lamp perspective on costume and dance.

Duryodhana Vadha was written by Vayaskara Aryan Narayanan Moosad (1841-1902). It consists of eleven scenes that cover the essential details of the challenge from the Kauravas to the Pandavas to a beguiled game of dice (Illustration 9) and its outcomes. The plot covers the actions of Dharmaputra,
Illustration 8:
The Five Pandavas and their wife Draupadi,
“Duryodhana Vadha”, M.K.K.Nayar Memorial Hall,
F.A.C.T. Industrial Estate, Udyogmandal, 10.12.’91
the eldest of the Pandavas who gambles away not only his army, palace, wealth and kingdom, but also, one by one, his brothers and their wife-in-common, Draupadi. Then there follows the public humiliation of Draupadi and the subsequent delivery of her curses against the Kauravas. Ultimately, the gambling sequence results in the banishment of the Pandavas to the forest for twelve years, from where they eventually emerge to defeat the Kauravas and bring about the fulfilment of Draupadi’s curse. Draupadi, at the time of her humiliation after the game of dice, cursed the Kauravas profusely. Her modesty was saved on that occasion by her prayer to Krishna, who, in response, provided an endless cloth to her garment, thus thwarting the further humiliation of her public disrobing. Her particular curse on Dussassana, the second of the Kauravas, was that Bhima would rip him open and drink his blood and that her own hair would remain dishevelled until the fulfilment of the curse (Bolland, 1988:49ff).

The distribution of masters and students as the characters retained for the performance of these scenes on this occasion was as follows:

**Duryodhana**, eldest of the Kauravas (Katti make-up type) -
Kalamandalam Vijay

**Dussassana**, second of the Kauravas (Chuvanna Tadi, Red Beard) -
Kalamandalam Ramadas

**Bhima**, second of the Pandavas (Paccha) – student

**Draupadi**, wife of the Pandavas (Minukku) – Kalamandalam Rajasekran

**Sakuni**, wicked uncle of the Kauravas (Special) –
Kalamandalam Prasna Kumar

**Dharmaputra**, eldest of the Pandavas (Paccha)- student

**Arjuna**, third of the Pandavas (Paccha) – student

**Nakula**, fourth of the Pandavas (Paccha) – student

**Krishna**, incarnation of Vishnu (Paccha with Muti) –
Kalamandalam Krishna Kumar

**Roudra Bhima**, Bhima in his terrifying form (Special) –
Kalamandalam Balasubrahmanian
There is, in Scene Seven, a manifestation of Krishna in the cosmic form of Vishnu, when he shows his *Viswarupa* and dazzles Duryodhana and Dussassana who fall in a faint to the ground. This cosmic manifestation was achieved by having the actor stand up on the small wooden stool, holding identifying symbols in each hand, one of them being the widely recognised conch shell, the other his *chakra* weapon. The transition of Bhima to his angry and terrifying form, Roudra Bhima, was achieved by the substitution of actors before his entry in Scene Ten. In this program a student played the earlier role but a master actor took over to manifest the blazing anger that drives his search for Dussassana. The highly energetic battle that ensues between Bhima and Dussassana on this occasion is fought out on an axis that moves from the centre of the metre-high stage along the very ordered central aisle formed by the chairs in the auditorium. At one point the actor playing Bhima takes two extraordinarily energetic leaps that see him fly from the top of the small wooden stool to centre-front stage and without pause, well down into the auditorium among the spectators, from where the battle rages on and back to the stage. The onlookers seated there show no acknowledgment of the skills underpinning this feat. There is no visible or audible response. They remain apparently impassive and uncommunicative, just as they have been since they very quietly filed in to take their seats in the late afternoon. Dussassana’s eventual defeat on stage is followed by Bhima disembowelling him and using his entrails as garlands. He drinks of his blood and roars most terrifyingly. The high levels of combative energy, across stage and auditorium provide extraordinary spectacle, as do the killing and ritual cannibalising (Illustration 10), and all of it is acted with masterful control and finely honed skills. The two actors have played this scene together about fifty times before. Their virtuosity in the more energetic and gymnastic aspects of a performance art that derives its training programs from traditional martial arts raise no enthusiasm that is apparent to me from the elitist appreciators who look on. The highly co-ordinated communication that sustains the fierce battle and the masterful control of energy levels draw minimal physical response from the elitist appreciators. Zarrilli (1992) says that “the immediate response of patron/connoisseurs during the performance may be
Illustration 9:
The Game of Dice, “Duryodhana Vadha”,
M.K.K.Nayar Memorial Hall, F.A.C.T.
Industrial Estate, Udyogmandal, 10.12.’91
completely non-verbal. A master actor should be capable of sensing pulse an
inner feeling tone of the audience as it responds to his performance”.

The highly integrated inter-layering of performance determinants
incorporates disciplined controls of energy and action in the more spectacular
and widely appealing spectacular aspects of Kathakali along side the more
hermetic aspects of the code of mudra. The connoisseurship that distinguishes
the elite provides them with greater access to the subtleties of mudra. Through
this limitation to the understanding of performance, elitism thus further
elaborates its exclusiveness. The conditions of possibility that are inherent to
fully-integrated Kathakali performance are, on the basis of interview material,
one that enable the progression from the competence of popular spectator to
that of elitist appreciator through a process of instruction imparted by the
performance itself. Such a process begins with the spectacular appeal of the
performance and progressively, with familiarisation, develops the competence
of spectators in other codes of performance, particularly, the more hermetic one
of mudra. The rejection of the popular, spectacular aspects of performance, even
those executed with the highest levels of discipline and competence by virtuoso
performers is inherently political: it “refuses conditions of possibility”.

The Residence of Rajanand, Raj Bhavan, Karalmanna,

It was the sixtieth birthday of his mother, the half-way mark to an ideal
longevity of one hundred and twenty years. Following a tradition that had been
more evident in the era before Land Reform Legislation, when the higher castes
provided more direct patronage of Kathakali, a high caste member and zealous
appreciator, Rajanand, organised a private program to celebrate a family
milestone. In this very rural setting, a canopy, such as might traditionally be
used to accommodate guests for a wedding banquet, was erected adjacent to the
Illustration 10:
Roudra Bhima festoons himself with entrails and drinks Dussassana’s blood, “Duryodhana Vadha”,
M.K.K.Nayar Memorial Hall, F.A.C.T.
Industrial Estate, Udyogmandal, 10.12.’91
family residence. Only the wall of the residence and the backstage curtain established closure; two sides remained open to the garden and the driveway that swept down a gentle bank to the house. The pillared gateway and the sturdy fence were close enough to the performance space to provide a lateral view of the performance to the uninvited but tolerated guests, the local rural populace, who draped themselves against both sides of the fence for much of the night. With nightfall, the invited guests, having eaten, took their places in three distinct areas. Mats at the front, close to the traditional tamped earth stage, accommodated the females and children, except for the matriarch and a handful of her elderly friends. That select group occupied the first row of chairs provided halfway down the canopied space and adjacent to the entrance of the residence and its facilities. The rear section, filled with rows of chairs, was for the males but a number of them shunned the seating for the flexibility of standing at the rear where their continuous but hushed conversations did not disturb the performers or other onlookers.

This group of well-renowned actors was called together for this particular occasion on the basis of their undisputed expertise in the respective roles that constitute the program: *Nala Charitam – the First Day* and *Rajasuya*. In a return to an earlier tradition, the actors did not wear leggings and the stage was the requisite twenty centimetres or so in height. The traditional lamp was lit very ceremoniously, but not, as is customary in village temple-festivals by members of the troupe. That element of the performers’ ritual preparations was appropriated to a more ceremonial inauguration of the evening’s program by the host. It became an aspect of broader theatricality apparently aimed at enhancing the prestige of the patrons.

As has been noted earlier, the cycle of four plays on Nala’s Story derive from the *Mahabharata* and so too does *Rajasuya*. *Nala Charitam – the First Day* is a play of eight acts, the first four of which are performed in this program. The characters appearing in these scenes are as follows:

- **Nala**, king of Nishada (Paccha make-up) (Illustration 20)
- **Narada**, a sage (Minukku)
- **Hamsa**, a golden swan (Special)
Damayanti, daughter of King Bhima (Minukku) (Illustration 20)

Attendants (Minukku)

Nala, having heard of the high reputation of Damayanti is already in love with her before the sage, Narada, visits him, in Scene One, and recounts her great beauty. In Scene Two, Nala provides a soliloquy that reveals the desperation of his love and ponders the way in which she might be won. In Scene Three he seeks solace in the palace garden, where the heavenly, golden swan, Hamsa, arrives and falls asleep. When Nala takes hold of the swan, it pleads for its life, thinking that it is about to be killed. In expression of its gratitude for being released, it provides a further elaboration of Damayanti’s beauty for Nala and promises to help him win her. In Scene Four, Damayanti and her friends are enjoying the palace garden when Hamsa arrives. She too is already besotted on the strength of Nala’s reputation. When she attempts to catch the swan she is led on a chase, until they are together alone. It is then that the swan recounts Nala’s great love of her and she in turn relates hers for him and begs the swan to take her message to Nala. The Hamsa flies away (Bolland, 1988:107).

Celestial intervention and mediation by the mythical Hamsa are not the stuff of great action and these scenes are characterised by lengthy soliloquies on the persuasion of great beauty and nobility and the depth of love requited. This is theatre of the sublime, poetry transposed to subtlety of gesture and expression and recounted in the elaborate grammar and syntax of mudra. In those spaces structurally opened up for the actor’s improvisations, in which the accompanying singers hold their silence and the narrative is no longer sung in Malayalam, then an extraneous translator appears in the wings of the stage. He is seated with a microphone and provides a simultaneous translation of the actors’ mudra gestures for the benefit of the onlookers. In terms of performance competence, this provision focuses on an extrapolation of mudra from the integrality of performance codes and establishes hegemony of the word. Mudra is given supremacy in the reception of the performance. The totality of the performers’ skills that intermesh to provide coherence include the spectacular use of costuming and make-up, percussive rhythms and Sanskrit slokas opening.
sung narratives in Malayam. Then there are the sheer energy, proxemics, conventionalised facial expression and eye-movements, dance-steps, and the whole range of actors’ skills. However, it is the complexity of mudra that is fore-grounded in order to reveal the more hermetic qualities of the performance and render its transcendence in this aesthetics of the elite.

*Rajasuya* was written by Karthika Tirunal (1724-1798). The three final scenes, Five, Six and Seven, were presented in this program. Very succinctly, the play deals with a dilemma that confronts Krishna when he is forced to prioritise his obligations before attending the royal consecration and investiture (*Rajasuya*), of Dharmaputra, the eldest of the Pandavas, who has sought his advice. At the same time as the arrival of the invitation, there comes a message, a petition for release, from “more than twenty thousand kings” that have been imprisoned by the wicked king Jarasandha. The death of the wicked king is foremost and it is achieved, by ruse, when a duel is arranged between Jarasandha and Dharmaputra’s brother Bhima, the second of the Pandavas. Subsequently at the Rajasuya sacrifice, Dharmaputra honours Krishna as chief guest. However, Sisupala, king of Chedi and friend of Jarasandha becomes resentful and insults Krishna. Krishna slays Sisupala with his divine weapon, *Sudarsana* (Bolland, 1988:29; Menon, 1979:70).

In this program the Brahmins, who are the disguised forms of Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna, in Scene Five, do not actually appear but are brought into the enacted narrative by way of the opening soliloquy of Jarasandha; and Scenes Six and Seven are combined. Thus Sisupala’s soliloquy on his avowed vengeance for the death of his friend leads into the ceremonial hall in which insults are traded and his slaying ineluctably occurs at the hand of Krishna.

Cosmic manifestation again arises in this narrative when Krishna conventionally displays his cosmic form before slaying Sisupala. However there is a more subtle and fluid form of transition in performance terms, as the narrative unfolds. It provides an instance of the looping of narrative time to incorporate mythical events and occurs here during Sisupala’s insulting of Krishna. The actor Kotakkil Nanda Kumar, who plays Sisupala, during his
improvisation, recounts in mime and mudra the highly popular incident of Krishna stealing the clothes of the bathing milkmaids. In this process there are shifts from third to first person and these strategies provide processually for the emergence once more of mercurial boundaries of reality, as the actor in mime provides very fluid transitions to embody the different characters embedded in his narrative.

In the cold grey light of dawn, the actors had promptly readied themselves for the return by public transport to their respective homes. I remarked to one of them, S.Naripaata Namboodiri, on the obvious distinction between the patrons and the program at this event and those of temple-festivals, noting the interface between the popular and the elite within the worlds of Kathakali. He replied: “Kathakali is like a vast banquet that offers many dishes and not all of them can be taken by everyone.” The patrons, the program and the venue on this occasion provided the quintessence of Kathakali elitism.

Kerala Kalamandalam Kuttampalam, Cheruthuruthy,

An end of term assembly of staff and students provided the occasion for an early evening program that reflected some of the diverse performance disciplines of this institution. A program of five items from diverse genres: three different forms of Ottam Thullal, in which mono-actors provide traditional stories, across forms that vary from the more popular and satirical to the more devotional; and then Mohini Attam, the classical discipline of female dancers, before the final item of Kathakali. The purpose-built kuttampalam within the precincts of the campus provides the performance space in the Kerala Kalamandalam, the State Training Centre for Performing Arts.

Students and staff took their places cross-legged on the floor of the very spacious kuttampalam. Honoured guests and dignitaries were provided with chairs on stage, in the very commodious wings. The Kathakali item in the
program was to be *Kalyana Saugandhika*, Scenes Two and Three. The major roles were to be acted by master actors but the minor role of Draupadi, common wife of the five Pandavas, provided an opportunity for a senior student. Seated on the floor of the Kuttampalam amongst Kathakali students, whose classroom work was familiar to me, I was surrounded by the babble of excited anticipation of scenes that were widely known and much loved. Their excitement at the programmed appearance of the highly popular character of Hanuman was evident. Narrative texts bring their own highly popular aspects in the form of much-loved characters, here Hanuman. However, the performance text in this case is also to bring a very familiar and popular unfolding of fraternal affection that is excitedly anticipated by the students.

*Kalyana Saugandhika* was written by Kottayath Tampuran (1645-1716) and is derived from the *Mahabharata*. While Arjuna is away in the Himalayas in search of the divine arrow, he is greatly missed by his brothers and their common wife Draupadi. One day there wafts to her on the wind a very fragrant and beautiful flower and she is so enchanted by it as to ask Bhima to go off in search of others. Bhima, knowing only that this Saugandhika flower has been transported by a wind from the North, sets off on a journey that will provide him with many difficulties but eventually lead him to a forest where his half-brother, the monkey god, Hanuman is dwelling. However, some wider recounting of the *Mahabharata* narrative is necessary here to explain Hanuman’s presence in that forest: after the crowning of Rama and Sita, Hanuman, who has received the gift of immortality from the gods, has retired to the forest to spend his days in meditation upon his lord, Rama. The well-established affection that exists between the brothers underpins the extended teasing that Hanuman inflicts upon Bhima in this highly popular scene of their forest meeting. Hanuman recognises Bhima, of course, but feels that he should be given a lesson in humility before receiving his help in the search for the flower. He changes himself into a decrepit old monkey and lies down in Bhima’s pathway. After the highly popular teasing of Bhima, Hanuman eventually reveals his true identity and provides the essential help. Bhima then goes on to find the flower in the garden of Kubera and returns with it to Draupadi (Bolland, 1988:40).
Illustration 11:
Curtain look of Hanuman, valorous and wise monkey chief (Vella Tadi make-up type),
– village temple festival, 1991
In these opening scenes the characters are:

**Bhima**, second of the Pandavas (Paccha make-up)
- Kotakkil Nanda Kumar

**Draupadi**, wife of the Pandavas (Minukku) – student

**Hanuman**, valorous and wise monkey chief (Vella Thadi, White Beard) (Illustration 11) – Kalamandalam Gopalkrishnan.

Scene Two provides for a series of marvellous transitions that are enacted in mime and mudra when Bhima describes his encounters on the journey. Unlike his spectators in this auditorium, he is unaware that the flowers are eventually to be located in the garden of Kubera, which is out of bounds to human beings. He sets off full of confidence in his own strength and ability to overcome all obstacles. En route he describes the mountains that he climbs and his awe at the sight of the forest and the wild beasts that he encounters therein: among them, an elephant being attacked by a python and then by a lion. In successive shifts from third to first-person narrative, the actor who is Bhima also embodies, successively, each of these theriomorphic roles: the actor plays Bhima but also becomes successively elephant and python and lion.

The finer details of the particular scene are as follows:

Bhima is annoyed and irritated to find a creature obstructing his path. He cannot climb over the monkey because he knows that he has a half-brother who is a high-born monkey, so he tells it to get out of his way. But the monkey merely retorts “I am so infirm that I cannot move my limbs, but if you wish you may move my tail to one side with your club and pass on”. Impatient to proceed, Bhima tries to move the monkey’s tail, but he finds that his club is firmly fixed in the powerful grip of the tail. All his efforts to extricate it prove futile. He has never known defeat before, and he feels sure that the monkey-shaped being before him must be a god: he therefore penitently asks him to reveal himself. The decrepit old monkey leaps to life and says, “I am Hanuman, your brother”. Bhima apologises for his arrogance and asks Hanuman to show him the divine form that he assumed when he made his great leap to Lanka in search of Sita. Hanuman complies with this request and then tells Bhima how to find Kubera’s garden and obtain the flowers he is looking for. He returns Bhima’s club to him with his blessing (Bolland, 1988:41)

The scene provides for great humour, based on the irony of spectator knowledge of the true identity of both characters. It also provides a very tender exposition of brotherly love. The different kinds of transitions that occur across both scenes offer great opportunities for very spectacular presentation of highly
popular and familiar narratives. The teacher-practitioners and the student-trainees who watched this Kathakali performance did so with a frame of integrality: they were as much appreciative of the popular aspects provided by favourite characters from familiar stories and the spectacular dimensions of the performance as they were with the particular skills of the performers drawing on the full spectrum of colour, costume, make-up, facial expression, energic discipline, proxemics, mime, dance, song and mudra to unfold their story-play.

**Trichur Kathakali Club, Regional Theatre, Trichur, 20. 12. 1991.**

The same scenes described above were presented two days later in very different circumstances under the patronage of the Trichur Kathakali Club. The grand civic architecture of the Regional Theatre in the city of Trichur provides a very “Westernised” context for the programs under the patronage of the Trichur Kathakali Club. Secular hours define the program: on this occasion an opening at 18.00 for a start at 18.30, to finish at 21.30. The auditorium is raked in the European manner with provision for an orchestra pit in front of the proscenium-arch stage. An American academic who intends to video-record the performance has sponsored this performance and has taken up his position against the orchestra pit.

The patrons are urbane and confident in their social interaction. This becomes particularly noticeable when it continues after the house-lights have gone down and the performance has begun. They turn from one row to another, waving, signalling, chatting and commenting. In-jokes are shared with self-conscious, overly expressive responses. Children become the focus of attention as they are accompanied to and from toilet facilities.

The stage height provides for inappropriate sight-lines to the actors’ legs and underskirts. Seated just off stage a translator with microphone provides a running commentary in Malayalam on the long tracts of mime and mudra undertaken respectively by Bhima and then Hanuman. The wooden stage responds very noisily to the vigorous stamping of the actors. A remarkable
sequence is provided in Hanuman changing himself into an old, decrepit monkey. On the wooden stool, up in a tree, with arms outstretched, he shows a pitiable loss of energy and stature, as he mimes the moulting of hair and falls to the ground. This sequence provides much humour for the patrons. Stage-hands walk calmly on, as convention permits, and shift the stool. The actor playing Hanuman incorporates this event into his miming, making a conscious reference to the back-stage world, the “real” world, and meshing it into the fictional world of his performance. The singers at the back of the stage stand near a waist-high table and it is on this that a stage-hand then serves them their tea. The enhancing of mime and mudra gesture by finely articulated drum-beats in punctuation provides a strong element of coherence to the performance. This performance and that of the same scene in the Kalamandalam program are distinguished particularly in the improvisations opened up by the respective actors. Here a very remarkable performance is given in the transformation of virile Hanuman into decrepit monkey, whereas at the Kalamandalam performance the sensitive enactment of brotherly love between Hanuman and Bhima was better developed.


This club program was performed in the internal courtyard of a local public school. The out-door space was well suited to the performance of Kathakali, with the slightly Italianate colonnade of the courtyard’s internal verandahs providing just four steps up to the stage. However, even at this height the aesthetics of the costuming was diminished by poor sight lines. Those in attendance were not without warmly responsive social graces but they seemed more intent upon their evening of Kathakali rather than social networking. A tarpaulin had been placed on the ground close to the stage and behind it there were rows of chairs that would remain in shadow and not bathed in the stage lighting. Those on the tarpaulin would provide the kind of intimate space and eye contact that actors prefer. Only half a dozen enthusiastic males occupied
these places, including some that arrived a little late. There was no segregation of gender amongst those occupying the chairs.

A club official provided a ceremonial introduction to the evening and a synopsis of the play. Broader theatricality and more civic ritual were added when a local dignitary carried out the lamp-lighting ritual, traditionally undertaken by the troupe. Further pomp was lent to the occasion of this ceremonial inauguration by the accompaniment of drumming from behind the stage back-drop. It departed from the simple unobtrusive ritual carried out by the performers themselves at temple-festival performances. Secular officialdom was created and fore-grounded. When carried out in more religious contexts by performers, the lamp-lighting ritual is one of a series that begins in the Green Room and extends to the scenographic space, extending the sacral impulse to both. The lamp-lighting at this venue was extrapolated from any rituals which may have been construed as sacral and it was re-inscribed with values that were decidedly secular, ceremonial and pompous.

This performance space, still in an out-door setting, seemed to provide a happy compromise, a halfway-house between the rural settings of village temple-festivals and the urban environment of this provincial city. As convention permits, stage-hands, apparently oblivious to the actors and invisible to the patrons, crossed the stage to replenish the oil in the traditional lamp throughout the performance. Electrical lighting enhanced the stage area. The patrons were critical and engaged in discussion that was clearly directed at the performance, but it was at a relaxed level of engagement. Once again a translator in the wings provided a running commentary on the lengthy sections of discursive mudra narration.
Conclusion

Venues provide architectural and spatial parameters that inevitably impact upon the shape of performances. The locations of those venues provide strong contextual significance to the performances: providing for overtones of a sacral or secular, popular or elitist, “metropolitan” or “rural” mentality. There are strong links between the venues and their associated patronage and the choices governing programs performed therein. While these factors may not be consciously and overtly political in their motivation, they are nonetheless political in their messages. One possible context for such messages is the discourse of Indian postcolonial identity that is being forged by an intelligentsia: an identity that embraces “modernity”, to include that which is secular, rational and metropolitan, in an attempt to fend off that which is perceived as fundamentalist, irrational or belonging to a “backward” psyche (Srivastava 1998). A politics of stasis is antithetical to this aspiration of “modernity”. In the context of this discourse the urban Kathakali clubs vis-à-vis the temple festival spaces provide for a more secular setting and, if not metropolitan, then more urban, civic contexts that dissociate themselves from the possible charges of “backward”, “irrational” or “fundamentalist”.

The locations of performances and the associated patronage and programs do create or refuse conditions of possibility. The “interdictions that the powers set forth in silence” are often embedded in the aesthetics that are promulgated within those venues by their associated patrons. The extrapolating and prioritising of one performance determinant over another, rather than the adopting of a frame of integrality for performance reception is also a dimension of the politics of elitism, here embedded in aesthetics.
Chapter Four - Contiguous Performance Genres

Introduction

Historically, the interplay of forces of conservatism and liberalism in Kerala has also been reflected in the emergence and modification of diverse performance genres. When viewed on one continuum, these changes demonstrate a gradual movement of performance away from the more sacred, temple-centred and ritual performances towards more socially inclusive, popular forms. The conservative/progressive struggle is also reflected in contrasting opinions on current changes within Kathakali. The interviews that I conducted in Kerala seem to bear out this dispute. What the respondents seem often to forget is that the development of Kathakali to its present form has been very eclectic. It has drawn on some sources that are traditional, folkloric, religious, martial and popular and others that are more elitist in origin and classically associated with the traditions of Sanskrit drama and the Natyasastra, along with the collective wisdom of connoisseur-patrons of dance-drama.

Within the processes of popularising performances, in this context of Hindu India, the religious nature of performance is not being impinged upon by the profane, such as that developed, for example, in the popular parodic performances of Mediaeval Christian Europe (Bakhtin, 1984). The issue of “sacrality” within Kathakali does not contend with “profanity”, as in a frequently used dualism from the Christian context, but currently there are identifiable dynamics of secularisation at play. The interplay between the sacral and the secular in this Hindu context is best viewed on a continuum and not as a dyad. In this chapter I draw upon literature to describe some of the socio-cultural factors that have contributed to the emergence of Kathakali from other performance genres and I also make extensive use of material that I have gathered in interviews and my own notes made in the field. On the basis of knowledge gleaned from my field-work, I seek to trace the influences of some
of those developmental factors upon aspects of the conservative/progressive disputes that seem to emerge within Kathakali spheres today. These contentious perspectives on Kathakali can often be identified within a sacral/secular continuum, but the conservative forces are not confined to the sacral; they can also be identified within the secular, as is revealed in my research.

I look at local, extant performance genres that can be regarded as contiguous to Kathakali and examine the dimensions that they have historically contributed to and/or currently share with Kathakali. Contiguity may be regarded here as a measure of the relationship between contemporary genres that have had an evolutionary contribution to make to Kathakali and their description leads me firstly to a genealogy of nascent Kathakali. However, contiguity is also often reflected contemporarily in their shared billing in traditional temple-festival performances, the programs of which can incorporate these diverse genres on the same occasion in adjacent performance spaces. Contiguity of genres also offers a socio-religious mapping of particular castes in performance spaces that are viewed in terms of their proximity to the heart of the temple, which may be seen as the epicentre of Brahmin influence on rural societies. Brahmin influence on the evolution of an orthodox aesthetics of Kathakali can be viewed, indirectly, from the perspective of their general caste responsibility, the priestly function of religious mediators and curators of ritual knowledge and as the promoters of temple-centric organisation of traditional society. I argue that Brahmin influence on traditional, orthodox aesthetics is conducive to a partiality to those performance determinants that incorporate “theatre of the word”, for example, the exposition and elaboration of sung Sanskrit slokas subsequently rendered by the actor in mudra (gestures), in contradistinction to those more physically energetic and spectacular performance determinants which are non-verbal. The word may be extrapolated and hegemonised over the integralitity of performance in all of its determinants, both verbal and non-verbal. A further significant aspect of the contiguity of these performance genres and their shared dimensions is, I argue, the different kinds of inter-textual readings that popular spectators can bring to Kathakali performances from contiguous performance texts.
Within the contiguous relations of diverse performance genres, it is also possible to trace particular caste responsibilities that have been traditionally associated with particular genres in Kerala and to align specific performance roles on a continuum of performance seen as a dimension of ritual. Some of the shifting contexts of performance traditions - those with more identifiable, progressive outcomes - can be mapped through the development of diverse performance responsibilities amongst patrons and players, and through the responsibilities of specific castes in the various genres. Those performance genres that I regard as being contiguous to Kathakali and describe in this chapter are Teyyam, Ayyappan Tiyatta, Kuttiyattam, Chakyar Kuttu and Krishnattom/Ramanattom, along with the martial one of Kalarippayatt.

If one assumes an hierarchical perspective of Brahmanic influence on performance aesthetics, and at its center the use of Sanskrit for performances aimed at that particular elite, then one can also trace the introduction of non-Sanskrit vernacular as evidence of more popular appeal to a wider public. In his discussion of “Patron as Author”, Zarrilli (1992:101) refers to Mencher’s description of the extension of Sanskrit education in Kerala. Menchen (1966:187) says:

Namboodiri skill in Sanskrit was fostered by the local rulers who often helped subsidise Vedic sacrifices, recitations, etc. Furthermore, it was often a Namboodiri who taught Sanskrit to the children of the ruling families. It should be noted in passing that, because of the close relationship between the Namboodiris and the matrilineal castes of Kerala, there was a far greater Sanskritic influence among non-Brahmins than has been noted on the east coast. Nayars, especially in central Kerala, where the Namboodiris were most concentrated, were strongly influenced by the daily customs of Sanskrit education; in consequence the Nayars of Kerala were far more literate than their equivalents on the east coast.

References to these processes are discussed here, not as an historical piece but selectively, in terms of the increasing adoption of the vernacular, Malayalam, in performance, and also through the progressive inclusion of various castes by allocating them performance responsibilities in different performance contexts.
The Brahmins, along with the patron-connoisseurs amongst the ruling families, long held the central responsibility for the patronage of Kathakali and the Nairs undertook a major role as performers. The highly energetic and precise movements of Kathakali owe much to the local martial art form, Kalarippayatt, and to the conjoining of martial art and performance responsibilities in the one caste, the Nairs. In Kerala this caste consists of an upper and a lower spectrum, the former covering the martial role usually associated with the higher caste Kshatrias and the latter encompassing the more servile, low-caste functions, in the service of high-caste households. It is the martial end of the spectrum that has a close nexus with the performance responsibilities of the caste within Kathakali.

For Kuttiyattam performances, that is, the local Sanskrit drama, it is the Cakyars who have traditionally provided the actors. They belong to an intermediate caste, Ambalavasis, (the temple dwellers’ caste), hierarchically located between the Brahmins and the Upper Nairs (Tarlekar, 1991:247-8). An interesting sociological function of the same Cakyars was to provide a caste repository for children, adulterously begotten on Brahmin women. Tarlekar puts their social status next to the Brahmins but points out that, not being Brahmins they cannot learn the Vedas. Their particular area of study is the Natyaveda and their vocation is Kuttu or Natya - the theatrical art. Their status allows them to wear the sacred thread and chant Gayatri.

Kathakali has evolved both from traditional, ritual performance genres that belong to a deep-rooted religious, folk-culture and also from genres within a high-culture, classical structure. Claims to classical legitimacy spring from the dictates of the Natyasastra. In her discussion of the notion of “classic” in relation not only to literature but also to her very penetrating discussion of myth, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (1998:37) says:

[W]e might define a classic in a rather broad sense as a mark of art (particularly but not necessarily a mark of literature) that comes from the past and is accepted by a tradition over a great period of time as embodying what is good and important. In addition to this criterion of content, a classic is usually regarded as a paradigm of form: it is beautifully expressed…
The *Natyasastra*,<sup>25</sup> a treatise on drama, music and dance, was probably first written between 200BC and 200AD (Richmond, in Richmond et al, 1990:35). However, “its present much-mutilated and retouched form dates from about AD500.”(Walker, Vol.1, 1983:142). Quintessential classicism is expressed in Sanskrit drama and in Kerala that means Kuttiyattam. However, other performance genres, such as Chakyar Kuttu and Krishnanattom have classical lineage in their derivation.

**Contiguous Performance Contexts and Inter-textual Relations to Kathakali**

The semiosis of performance, in its wide-reaching personal references, is never utterly confined to sets of conventions that exclusively define a particular genre. Within the general context of Performance Studies De Marinis, in his discussion of the hierarchical organisation of theatrical frames of reference, notes the “impossibility of clear distinctions between the spectator’s theatrical and extra-theatrical knowledge”. He goes on to indicate “the possibility that identical cognitive structures or units can simultaneously be a part of both specifically theatrical and extra-theatrical schemas” (De Marinis, in Fitzpatrick, 1989:183). This inter-textual factor in the semiosis of performance texts is of considerable importance when one considers the “dramaturgy of the spectator” (De Marinis, 1988), that is the various receptive operations carried out by the spectators, which include perception, interpretation, aesthetic appreciation, memorisation, emotive and intellectual response and so on. “The partial or relative autonomy of each of the different dramaturgies (the director’s, the writer’s, the performer’s, the spectator’s) all work together in the composition of the performance and must be seen as mutually setting and occasionally adjusting to each other’s boundaries”(De Marinis, 1988:101).

The performance genres examined here below provide for inter-textual readings of multivalent symbols, imported from one to another by the
evolutionary processes of the particular genre. These symbols also have associations with extra-theatrical social processes, viz., the religious, the political, the martial, the domestic, and so on. Inevitably, there exists to some degree a mirroring between the microcosm of specific, “marked” performance genres (*natyadharmi*) and the “unmarked”, mundane performances dictated by social interaction in the wider culture (*lokadharmi*). The values of the one reflect, generate and elaborate the other.

Even those elitist appreciators of Kathakali, who have highly refined their performance competencies, will not confidently be able to divorce the conventional symbols of *natyadharmi*, which are specifically appropriate to the genre, from their polysemic character (Elam, 1980:11). *Natyadharmi* is derived in part from *lokadharmi*. There is a reflection and cross-feeding of conventions and symbols between the two. To varying degrees spectators’ very personal readings of symbols from Kathakali will also be influenced by their interpolation of vestigial symbols from other contiguous performance genres. The multivalence of symbols means that “readings” of performances cannot be confined within *natyadharmi* to the exclusion of *lokadharmi*, nor within Kathakali to the exclusion of other contiguous performance genres.

Within the worlds of “marked” performance, particular genres co-exist in close contiguous relations with one another. Often there has been, historically, an interchange of elements of make-up, costuming, music, dance, mudras and other iconographic elements from one to another. Often the diverse, contiguous genres narrate the same characters from the same stories. For example, the very popular god Ayyappan is celebrated in the ritual performance of Ayyappan Tiyyata and also in Kathakali. There exist two Kathakali plays relating to the Story of Ayyappan, though they are not widely performed. Then, the universally popular character of Krishna, avatar of the god Vishnu, is recounted in Krishnanattom performances within the temple at Guruvayur and also in Kathakali; while tales of Rama, another avatar of Vishnu, are to be found in Kuttiyattam and also in Kathakali. Certainly, Kathakali has drawn on a number of pre-existing performance genres for its own evolution. Whether traditional and folkloric, ritual and sacred, or more classically defined in their conventions
as dance or drama, these various performance genres often share similar components, such as percussive music, make-up and costuming, and so on. This contiguity can also be perceived in terms of shared temple spaces as performance venues, or ranged on a notional continuum of progressively less “sacralised” spaces that extend from the inner temple to the temple courtyard or the adjacent public square. They can be seen as contiguous in their co-presence, in shared billing, at the same all-night programs of temple festivals in rural Kerala. They are contiguous, also, in their narration of common and inter-related stories. The spectators to these contiguous performance genres carry vestiges of symbols of the one to the semiosis of the others, for reasons that are historical, mythical and socio-religious, and by reason of shared performance conventions.

**Teyyam, “dance of the gods”, in relation to Kathakali**

Zarrilli (1984:43) notes that there are over three hundred different forms of ritual propitiation that fall under the general classification of Teyyam. He notes further that another form of ritual performance, Mudiettu, which is a specific form of ritual performance for the propitiation of Kali, also shares common elements with Teyyam, and can thus in like manner be seen to have contributed to the development of Kathakali. The Teyyam performances are carried out in the temples of North Kerala to honour a very wide variety of deities. Pannikar (1991:38) points out that “the rudiments of dance music which later developed and evolved into the art of Krishnanattom and Kathakali can be clearly found in Teyyam music.” He goes on to emphasise the folk literary traditions whence derive Teyyam songs; traditions that have shunned conscious sophistication and survive as an integral part of rural idiom in village communities. In the complex symbolic designs of make-up that are characteristic of Teyyam performances there are discernible relations with the make-up of Kathakali.
In the accompanying photographs of Teyyam (Illustrations 12, 13 and 14), one can observe the manner in which elaborate, colourful face-mask construction blurs the boundary between animate flesh and inanimate headdress and ornamentation. The use of this flat enamel-like technique in Kathakali designs of facial make-up is also brought to effective stage-craft by the actors’ highly disciplined control of facial muscles, which at times seems to cross and re-cross the boundary between the iconically inanimate and the very energetically animated. Zarrilli makes reference to Teyyam not only as possible contributor to Kathakali’s make-up and costuming but also as a possible derivative source for Kathakali’s “techniques and content of staging battles between good and demonic figures”. Ashley and Holloman (in Richmond et al, 1990:134-35) elaborate on caste responsibilities:

The right to perform teyyam is generally inherited by the male members of several low caste communities called Malayan, Vannan, Kopalan and Velan. The performance is called kolakarran, which literally means “the man who takes the form of god.” In addition to performing teyyam, Malayans and Vannans serve their communities in other capacities. Malayans perform exorcisms and Vannans are known to engage in the business of traditional medicine as well as providing purified dress for ritual purposes in temples.

On the evening of 29.12.’91 and the morning of 30.12.’91, I attended performances of Vellatum/Teyyam, accompanied by my research assistant, Krishnan Kutty, and a local of the Kannur (Cannanore) district, Gopalkrishnan Nair, who at that time was a senior student of Kathakali at the Kerala Kalamandalam. The Vellatum/Teyyam performances were given in conjunction with festivities in the Sri Ramanthali Thavuriyat Temple at Ramanthali, near Payyanor, in the district of Kannur. The temple is dedicated to Vettakorumakan and Ooril Pizhachi. On the same festival program, within the temple compound but in a more peripheral space somewhat removed from the shrines, the popular story-telling form of Thullal was being performed. My own European intertextual references take me to mediaeval minstrels for a likeness to this mono-actor whose song and dance provides lively satirical comment and traditional stories. In order to gain access to the temple compound itself, one had to traverse an adjacent performance space which had been set up, with a temporary scaffold stage and a cordonned area for gender-segregated spectators.
Illustration 12:
Teyyam – Vellatum, Sri Ramanthali Thavuriyat
Temple, Ramanthali 29.12.91
Illustration 13:
Teyyam – Vellatum, Sri Ramanthali Thavuriyat
Temple, Ramanthali, 29.12.91
of contemporary drama. My field notes from that occasion include the following:

*Evening of 29 December, 1991: Vellatum.*

Vellatum was described by my companions as being a synoptic rehearsal or presage of what was to follow, the next morning. Certainly, it was linked in some preparatory form, if it was not a prefiguration of the following morning’s performance.

The god that had taken on the actor’s body, before his exit from the Green Room, with drumming and flaming torches, was Vettakorumakan. He was the huntsman son of Siva and Parvati, conceived and born during their frolicking in the form of earthly hunters, as Kirata and Kirastree (a sojourn recounted in the Kathakali story of Kirata).

Ooril Pizhachi was the man who was created by the god Indra to fight Vellatum when the latter went up to heaven, because he had been invincible on earth and the gods feared his powers. Ooril Pizhachi and Vellatum fought for many years and then they ended up as intimate friends.

In both the evening and the morning performances the upper torso of the actor was naked. I am told that in other presentations of Teyyam, the upper torso is generally not exposed; this bared and painted torso is peculiar to the tradition of Vettakorumakan.


The actor left the Green Room with the pomp and fanfare of the night before, in order to complete his head-dressing and ornamentation in full view in the temple court-yard. Fireworks and drumming announced and accompanied the actor/god from the Green Room, where the necessary invocatory prayers and mantras had already been uttered.

The actor’s body, for the entire performance, was all a-tremble, signifying the presence of the god within it. He really was a most awesome, fearsome sight.

For the duration of the ceremony, which then carried to completion the head-dressing and ornamentation of the actor/god, one of the acolytes who held the canopy, or else a votive lamp suspended from a long pole, was clearly the master-actor’s apprentice. He took over from the master...
Illustration 14:
Teyyam – Vettakorumakan, Sri Ramanthali Thavuriyat Temple, Ramanthali, 29.12.91
in the re-telling of the story in song/poem form. This narration was done in what, I was assured, was simple Malayalam, but was carried out at such a rapid pace of delivery as to be quite unintelligible to most spectators. When the apprentice faltered in his recitation, the master prompted him.

The morning performance of Teyyam was characterised by very martial movements and gestures: different swords and shields were taken up, in front of the deity in the main temple, during the circumambulations, or tangential trajectories around the smaller courtyard shrine. The dance steps and the posturing were often of a combatively challenging nature.

The actor/god, after his performance, took on an oracular function and passed by the encircling spectators, stopping, with terrifying gaze, to make pronouncements on particular individuals. I was subjected to the attention, gaze, and very direct, very proximal frontal engagement of the actor/god, while he made auspicious pronouncements upon my presence. My research assistant, Krishnan Kutty, recounted later that he had been “afraid” to look with direct gaze upon the actor/god during his engagement with me. Krishnan Kutty had tried, instead, to look at me obliquely, from his immediately adjacent position, from the corner of his downcast eyes, in order to determine just how it was that I could hold the gaze of such a terrible sight. Krishnan Kutty describes himself as a non-believer, as an atheist, and he was amazed at the power that this terrifying figure was nevertheless able to exert over him.

The families that traditionally carry out these performances are from the Sudra caste; the lowly are ritually exalted to god-hood by the possession of their bodies for the duration of the performance. It had been pointed out to me by another local, a member of Gopalkrishnan Nair’s family, that the actors of Teyyam are generally known to make much use of alcohol.

The customary fairground structures had already been established in the space immediately surrounding or adjacent to the temple courtyard. The temporary performance space which had been established for the “drama” performance, included a central “aisle” formed by two parallel ropes on pole supports, instead of the usual single rope which often segregated the sexes.

The cost of the three day’s festivities, including the fireworks, performers, etc., among these, the “drama” which was staged on the stage-scaffolding erected temporarily in the space immediately adjacent to the temple, was Rs.25,000/- (currently about AUD 1,000). Offers of cash and produce poured in from the devotees, some of whom weighed-in on a set of scales, in order to donate their body weight in produce, in votive thanks for boons received.
The components of make-up and costuming that are shared in some measure, between Teyyam and Kathakali, or that suggest derivation, are of more than historical interest. Their common elements carry with them the vestiges of ritual and of religious context, in a very general sense, from one performance genre to the other. For some popular spectators who are less steeped in the traditions and conventions of Kathakali, their “readings” of Kathakali performances become imbued with the shared elements of other genres. When a spectator has not been familiarised with the specific conventions of performance genres then it is not unreasonable to assume that all of the conventionally recognised boundaries between genres do not exist and that the respective assumptions that underpin specific genres may become conflated.

Among the factors that prompted me to reflect on these processes of intertextual referencing and conflation within the dramaturgy of the spectator was a remark made by a an elitist appreciator of Kathakali in regard to popular spectators (Mangod Kathakali Club, 12.12.’92). Madhavan, the fifty-four year old, retired teacher and Ayurvedic pharmacist, when interviewed noted that “the scheduled castes, that is the low castes, don’t know the stories. For them crowned Kathakali characters are only a bigger ghost and a small ghost.” One assumes that this remark was not driven by malicious disparagement and that its intent was to underline the lack of discernment that results from ignorance of the stories and of the performance conventions. The comment was, after all, directed at a misreading of a performance text and not a literary text. So, whence derives the performance reading of “ghosts”? Ritual divinities and notions of sacrality cross boundaries; not simply the boundaries that define temple compounds and their adjacent public squares, the rural performance spaces of Kathakali, but also internalised, less demarcated boundaries within the semiosis of spectators. This blurring of boundaries and conflation of genres may account for Madhavan’s remark, in which case, dimensions of the temple-centred ritual performance described above in the detailed account of Teyyam might well be shifted on the performance continuum of sacrality, by undiscerning spectators, to extend to other performance genres, particularly to those contiguous performance genres that generally enjoy the patronage of
Illustration 15:
Ayyappan Tiyatta Kalam,
Chammpangkulamara Temple, Kettaya, 1.12.'91
temple committees and the context of temple festivals and are subsequently imbued with a misplaced sacrality, Kathakali among them. The god celebrated in the above Teyyam nowadays finds a narrative link to his genesis in the Kathakali story of Kirata, which brings the god Shiva and his consort Parvati to earth in the form of forest dwellers, during which time Vettakorumakan was conceived, but not in the Kathakali play.

**Ayyappan Tiyatta - a narrative link between ritual, iconography and Kathakali.**

Another ritual that is widely performed, and at times on the same billing as Kathakali for temple festivals is Ayyappan Tiyatta (also known as Tiyattiyattam). Lord Ayyappan [See Appendix 1] is one of the most popularly revered deities of Kerala and it is to him that this religious performance is dedicated. “According to local legends, Ayyappan played an important role in Kerala’s history, having taken human form and come to the aid of the Malayalee people in a time of distress” (Zarrilli in Richmond et al, 1990:151). The males who are responsible for this very specific ritual performance belong to the **tiyyati Nambyars**, temple servants who rank highly in the caste hierarchy. Zarrilli (in Richmond et al, 1990:152) elaborates caste responsibilities:

Their performance responsibilities include: (1) contracting for a performance of the ritual, (2) drawing the elaborate floor drawing (**kalam**) representing the deity, (3) singing the songs of the deity while accompanying themselves with percussion instruments, (4) performing the mono-acting (**kuttu**) narration of some of Ayyappan’s legends, while in special costume, and (5) performing the possession dance concluding in the delivery of oracles.

It will be noted from the description that follows, from my own field notes, that a Brahmin is also present in order, through purification rites, to initiate the performance. Specialist percussive musicians accompany the dancing and acting.

My experience of Ayyappan Tiyyata was as part of a full evening’s program that included Kathakali, at the Champangkulamera Temple, which
marks a hamlet near the village of Kettaya in the district of Palghat (Pallakad), on Sunday 1.12.’91.

The festival was to honour Ayyappan who was widely celebrated at that time of the year.

The pavement drawing on the floor of one of the peripheral buildings, which open onto the temple courtyard, was still incomplete at 17.00. It was being prepared for the Ayyappan Tiyyata. Above it, suspended from the ceiling there was a bamboo canopy decorated with fringed strips of leaves. Outside in the courtyard that surrounded the inner sanctum of the temple, the blaring brass and percussion musicians and the three brightly caparisoned elephants, hired for the occasion, and were circumambulating the temple and entertaining the crowds. The smell of fresh elephant dung filled the nostrils as one entered into that courtyard from outside the temple compound where, in the open space adjacent to the temple, the Kathakali performance stage and canopy had already been erected.

At 18.30 there began the ceremony of the Kalam, the pavement drawing, for the ceremony of Ayyappan Tiyyata, the performance of which can be located within the rituals of puja (ceremonial worship). After the lighting of the four traditional oil lamps that mark the corners of the drawing from the central lamp at the bottom of the drawing, the ceremonies were opened by a Brahmin seated on the floor next to the fifth, central lamp, at the feet of the then completed larger-than-life-size drawing of Ayyappan, which had been executed in coloured powder directly onto the floor.

The Brahmin’s opening mantras and gestures before the traditional lamp were accompanied by the usual sprinkling of water and scattering of flower petals. These actions were accompanied by the drumming by father and son performers who were seated on the floor to the right of the Brahmin. When the Brahmin’s duties were completed, the two other ritual performers successively replaced him in the performance.

The father took the Brahmin’s place and seemed to replicate many of the Brahmin’s purificatory gestures, but more briefly. The son joined a group of drummers and cymbalists standing behind the seated father. The percussion accompanied and punctuated the actions of the father. Both father and son were members of the Kurup caste to which responsibility for maintaining that particular ceremony was delegated.

The father and son, like the members of the orchestra and the Brahmin, were thus far dressed only in the traditional cream or white dhoti, which is worn with bare feet and naked upper torso, the customary attire for entry to the temple sanctum. Then the seated father began to untie a small red cloth bundle and to reveal the elements of his costume: the heavy-quality red shirt with tie strings at the back, which is similar to those adopted in Kathakali, the head-dress and the elaborate, bulky costume ornaments. Having dressed himself, he began to dance. His simple repetitive steps, all done at the foot of the drawing were accompanied
Illustration 16:
Ayyappan Tiyatta Kalam,
Champangkulamera Temple, Kettaya, 1.12.'91
by narrative mudras and sweeping gestures, but he employed little of the facial and eye expressions of abbinhya (art of dramatic expression); dead-pan but for the fixed gaze and “inner smile” which provided a gentleness to his face.

Upon completion of his own contribution, the father sat, removed his costume and re-packed his bundle. Meanwhile the son, who had gone off to bathe ritually in the adjacent temple pond, then returned to replace his father at the feet of the drawing. His dance steps, forwards and backwards, with much twirling of his ceremonial sword, involved numerous circumambulations of the drawing and its leaf-fringed canopy. As he drew his routine to its conclusion, he slashed the suspended fronds of decoration and frenetically danced over the powdered colours of the drawing, destroying all evidence of it and reducing its contrasting blackness and bright colours to a mixture of grey dust. The small stool which had stood at the head of the drawing and supported a decorative element was then dragged, as a part of the dismantling, first to the left hand side and then to the centre of the disarrayed drawing surface and canopied space. The dancer sat upon it occasionally, ceaselessly gesturing, wildly, with his sword.

Upon completion of the danced destruction, the dancer appeared to be in an altered state of consciousness. The remnant grey dust from the mixing of coloured powders was distributed to eager spectators who received it on pieces of leaf for conservation in their homes. It is held to be auspicious.

The entire ceremony took over two hours. It was just one of the items of the festival bill, which included the all-night performance of Kathakali, programmed to start at about 21.00.

In the case of Ayyappan worship, the polysemic interpolation between ritual performances, which take place within the temple compound, and Kathakali, which in rural settings is usually performed immediately adjacent to the temple, in the public square, is imbued with further cross-pollination of the genres. It is Ayyappan who is nominated as the favourite character in Kathakali performance by Thailambal, a fifty-two year old Brahmin housewife whom I interviewed at the Sri Krishna Temple at Kavassery, in the district of Palghat (Pallakad) on the occasion of the temple festival (6.12.’92). She stressed her devotion to Ayyappan in response to boons received relating to her health condition. It was she who also remarked that the special attraction of Kathakali was that “we are given the power (shakti) to see and understand the divine images”.

The two ritual performances, Teyyam and Tiyyata, which are discussed above lie outside the dicta of the Natyasastra. These two folkloric traditions find their performance spaces within the temple compound itself. The low caste
performers who sustain Teyyam embody the god for the duration of the performance. Higher-caste members, whose traditional role of temple responsibilities places them closer in the hierarchy to the Nambudiri Brahmins, enact Ayyappan Tiyatta. Both forms are examples of ritual performances that provide contextual origins for dimensions that can be identified in Kathakali in the form of percussive music, make-up, costuming and ornamentation. Ayyappan Tiyyata also feeds into Kathakali at a narrative level in as much as Ayyappan’s story is also recounted in a Kathakali play. The performance spaces for both of the above ritual forms are located within the temple proper but they can be directly adjacent to the spaces offered for Kathakali performances and possibly on the same billing for the same festival. The associations of ritual and sacrality can be vestigially transferred to Kathakali in polysemic interpolation of performance dimensions and also by way of the spatial contiguity, on a performance trajectory of sacrality that extends from the centre of the temple through the courtyard and into the adjacent Public Square.

**The Natyasastra – providing the classical tones of Kathakali**

“When the nature of the world, possessing pleasure and pain both, is depicted by means of representation through gestures and the like (i.e., speech, dress and make-up and temperament), it is called *Natya*” (NS.I.109, in Tarlekar, 1991:1). The canons of the *Natyasastra* are generally regarded as having been compiled between 200B.C. and 200A.D. (Richmond, in Richmond et al, 1990:35). This text, which seems to have been developed while Sanskrit drama was developing⁵, offers explanations as to the origins of drama and provides encyclopaedic formulations on all aspects of theatrical production and reception.

The canonic pronouncements of the *Natyasastra* provide a basis for the discussion of Sanskrit drama and of those performance traditions that demonstrate dimensions derivative from it. Appeal is also made to its authority
by those patrons, performers and spectators who seek to appropriate the notion of “classicism” in defence of their espoused positions on aesthetical questions.

Bharata, the semi-legendary author to whom the Natyasastra is attributed, so the story goes (Walker Vol.1, 1983:142-44), had a vision of one of the great celestial dramas in the court of the god, Indra. Subsequently he was ordered by Indra, for the benefit of mankind, to put into literary form as much of the performance as a mere mortal could comprehend. Bharata’s reconstruction of the principles of this divine performance included particular reference to the spectacular, the audible, and the instructive nature of the performance. Under inspiration from Brahma, and with reference to the Vedas, he formulated the four constituent aspects of recitation, action, song and sentiment into the art of Natya, or drama. The basic patterns of dance were developed with the assistance of the god Shiva and his consort Parvati. The resulting encyclopaedic work on poetics, drama, dance, music and aesthetics is the Natyasastra. “Here we find the beginnings of the doctrine of rasa (mood) and bhavam (emotion) [See Appendix 2]; rules for dramatic writing; plot elements; description of gestures; technical devices, and so on, which were further amplified by his successors”(Walker, Vol.1, 1983:143).

Not surprisingly, the traditional account of the origins of the Natyasastra provides for legitimisation of its precepts by way of reference, not only to the four Vedas but also by the inclusion of direct support from the gods Shiva and Parvati. Indra’s command that performances should also be instructive itself opens a series of aesthetical and political polemics when one asks the further question “instructive upon what and to whom?” (These issues are pursued in Chapter Eight of this thesis.)

In a traditional, religious account of the origins Tarlekar (1991:3) includes reference to Bharata having arranged a performance with his hundred sons, in which there were adopted three distinctive styles of dramatic action: verbal, grand and energetic. It was at the request of the god Brahma that the graceful was also included; and this gave rise to the inclusion of the sentiment of love and, moreover, a need for women. The divine nymphs, the Apsaras, who were
expert in the embellishments of dramatics, were handed over to Bharata for this purpose. Only then was the dramatic art considered fully-fledged.

However, Tarlekar (1991:8-9) also provides a discussion of the secular perception of the popular origins of drama. He traces the element of popular appeal through the incorporation into Sanskrit drama of the component of mime and the acknowledgement of the widest possible audience by the inclusion of dialects along with Sanskrit. In this secular perspective, the view that religious ceremonies explain the origin of drama is regarded as an erroneous one.

Nowadays the Natyasattra is most often to be cited in relation to classicism and usually by members of elitist, well-educated groups. However this text seems always to have encompassed a popular dimension, even if the questions of attribution, validation and appropriation remain polemical. Within the polemics of attribution, what is not disputed is Gosh’s affirmation that “Indra explicitly says that an object of diversion is needed which will be sarva-varnika, i.e., for all men” (NS, Gosh, I.8ff). While elsewhere the Natyasattra provides the criteria for the assessment of an ideal spectator those same criteria must be read within the broader stipulations that the performances be “instructive” and for all people, regardless of caste.

Although the Natyasattra is widely referred to in order to support what is purportedly a classical, orthodox and often elitist view of drama and dance, there remain within its interpretations lively disputes on the degree to which it is inclusive, rather than exclusive, of popular traditions. Not least of these are the explicit inclusion of vernacular along with Sanskrit and the emphasis that it gives to the nature of participants as “spectators”. Sanskrit drama, which in Kerala is cognate with Kuttiyattam, is quintessentially classical, but it provides for the inclusion of popular dimensions, particularly evidenced in the role of Vidushaka, which is discussed in the following section.

Promulgation of the dicta of this text and of the aesthetics developed within it fell to the high-caste Brahmins and rulers who were generally able to
Illustration 17:
Kuttiyattam – Sanskrit Drama,
Old Kalamandalam, Cheruthuruthy, 27.11.’91
read Sanskrit and who variously filled the roles of author/connoisseur/patron for Sanskrit dramas. The same high castes provided the traditional patronage for nascent Kathakali. It is therefore not surprising that Kathakali, which was in some dimensions a further step towards popularising dance-drama, nevertheless retained a classical lineage.

**Sanskrit Drama and Kuttiyattam –
classical ancestry to Kathakali**

Although, originally, the precepts of the *Natyasastra* specifically regarded the performance of Sanskrit dramas, reference to this text is necessarily made by anyone supporting the classical attributes of other Indian performance genres, including Kathakali. In addition, the ancestry of Kathakali also spans local traditional performances, often of a ritual nature, such as Teyyam and Ayyappan Tiyyata, which have been discussed earlier in this chapter. These ritual and folkloric performances, which also contribute to the shape of Kathakali, may well have origins that precede the writing of the *Natyasastra*; their direct associations with the ritual idioms of rural communities very readily identify them as being of a popular nature.

The more classical dimensions of Kathakali can be traced through Sanskrit drama, the local form of which is extant in Kuttiyattam performances in Kerala. The classical theatre, however, incorporated dimensions that were clearly of a popular appeal. One such dimension in Kuttiyattam is embodied in the central figure of Vidushaka,31 who speaks Malayalam. The popular appeal of Vidushaka, the “every-dayness” of the role, with which popular spectators might readily identify, is illustrated in some measure by Benjamin Walker’s description of the inherited character from the broad context of Sanskrit drama, which was to provide the matrix for the local, Kerala version, Kuttiyattam. Walker (Vol.1, 1983:294-95) says:
Vidushaka (was) the constant companion and confidant of the hero. He is nearly always a Brahmin but for some unknown reason was invariably a ludicrous figure, a bald, misshapen dwarf, crude in speech and behaviour, who spoke the vernacular Prakrit\(^2\) [rather than Sanskrit], and was the butt of all jokes. How a Brahmin came to be cast in such a part has not been explained, except by the hypothesis of the character’s derivation from an indigenous, secular, dramatic tradition.

Other popular elements of performance can be identified in its music and dance, in its visual, though not extravagantly spectacular, elements of performance. Traditionally, Kuttiyattam was performed within the compound walls of temples, and optimally, in purpose built temple theatres, kuttampalam, such as those that still exist in Kerala, at Irinjalagada, Guruvayor and Trichur\(^3\). Kuttiyattam performance spaces remain central to the temple compounds, central to Brahman influences in the temple-centric organisation of rural communities and subsequently to the dictates of Brahmin aesthetics, that is to say, central also to the classicism associated with canons of the Natyasastra. Richmond (in Richmond, et al, 1990:94) is quite clear that “Kuttiyattam is a sacred event, designed as a ritual dedication to the presiding deity of the temple in which it is presented”.

Kuttiyattam may well be the oldest surviving art of the ancient world. Certainly it is one of the oldest continually performed theatre forms in India. It is generally regarded, even if specific links remain as yet unproven, as an extant form of the ancient Sanskrit drama of pan-Indian tradition. Although its origins are not precise, there are records of the tenth century A.D. which indicate that it was already at an advanced stage by this date (Richmond, in Richmond et al, 1990: 88).

At a tangent, but related, the theorised etymology of the word Kuttiyattam focuses one on the importance of the dimension of movement, of dance, rather than simply the declamatory elements of Sanskrit drama, which seem to predominate in its extant form in Kerala. Tarlekar (1991: 249) refers to its composition from kutti (combined) and attam (acting) and goes on to cite S.K.Nayar who asserts that attam is derived from adu (to move, dance). These elements arguably sustain a further degree of wider appeal in this genre from the outset.
What must be considered a very strong factor of popular appeal in Kuttiyattam, is the inclusion of the local vernacular, Malayalam, which is embodied in the role of Vidushaka (Illustration 18). This character enjoys enormous liberty and flexibility in his bridging functions, as translator and commentator and as author of often satirical or ironical social remarks upon the words and actions of other characters in the plays. His particular attention is on the behavior of Brahmins who appear to have fallen into degeneracy and from the laws and traditions which require them “to live strictly a life devoted to dharma, artha, kama and moksa” (Venu, 1989:8). Vidushaka’s role, in the degree of its licence, can be likened to the very sage foolery of the traditional European court jesters who enjoyed carte blanche before dignitaries.

Subsequently, Kathakali was to take this popular dimension of the local vernacular and use it much more widely: the sung narratives of Kathakali, in Malayalam, continue throughout most of the performances. On the other hand, the use of Sanskrit in Kathakali has been reduced to opening slokas, which become elaborated in the sung narratives and in the gesture language of mudra. Zarrilli (in Richmond et al, 1990:326-27) says:

The two most basic textual units used by the (Kathakali) playwright in constructing his play are the sloka and the pada. As used in the context of Kathakali plays, sloka are verse forms, usually written in the third person, which narrate what happens in the dialogue portion of the play. They are composed in particular metrical patterns and set the context for the “action” of dialogue scenes. Pada are used to create the “dialogue” portions of the play. They are usually written in the first person, as if the actor (who never speaks) were actually speaking the lines.”

This re-weighting of the use of Sanskrit vis-à-vis the local vernacular, even if the sung Malayalam is at times highly Sanskritised, provided for a much wider popular appeal in Kathakali. However, Kathakali continued to adopt many stage practices that had been developed in Kuttiyattam, “including the very distinguished technique of abhinaya” (acting) (Tarlekar, 1991:44).

G.H.Tarlekar (1991:40), in Studies in the Natyasastra, makes reference to the gradual development of a stronger elitist - popular division between Sanskrit drama and “the popular type of plays using prominently the elements of music and dance which were current as the means of popular entertainment
throughout36. Similar elitist-popular tensions are replicated within the traditions of Kathakali nowadays. These dual perspectives, the one of the exclusiveness of elitist appreciators and the other of the inclusiveness of popular spectators of Kathakali, respectively, is continually borne out in the interviews that I have conducted in the field, in Kerala. These tensions emerge not only in regard to the importance that is given to particular performance codes and their associated spectator competencies within Kathakali, but also in the comments regarding other contemporary performance genres that, currently, are widely regarded as being more popular than Kathakali, such as contemporary drama.

The successive developments in performance traditions illustrate degrees of flexibility in the way the canons of the Natyasastra have been interpreted to embody the classical elements, while nevertheless modifying the tradition. The responses to more popular elements of theatre, such as music and dance, that can be identified within the Natyasastra and within Kuttiyattam, and within other subsequently developed performance genres, illustrate waves of change to performance traditions. At times, these see the pendulum swing to stronger or weaker popular developments within performance. The patterns of participation and patronage, which have been wrought as a result of emerging and modified traditions of performance, also reflect changes of a social, political and economic order within Hindu India’s traditionally rigid caste-structures.

Chakyar Kuttu Performances – extrapolating the translator/commentator from Kuttiyattam and creating a mono-actor performance genre.

Tarlekar (1991: 248-49) notes that the religious character of Kuttu is underscored by the fasting that the actors undertake until the performance is over and by the locating of performances exclusively in temples. He regards it as “a visual sacrifice to please the gods” and notes that “(t)he caste Hindus alone are allowed to witness it”. Tarlekar further notes that there are three
varieties of Kuttu\textsuperscript{37} but that it is in *Prabandaham* Kuttu that the Chakyar wears the dress and make-up of Vidushaka\textsuperscript{38}.

Panikkar (1991:119) notes the formal links between the Vidushaka in Kuttiyattam and the subsequent development of Chakyar Kuttu:

The authorship of many of the *slokas* of Vidushaka is attributed to a poet named Tolan, a court poet of the royal playwright Kulasekhara. It is these two poets, Tolan and Kulasekhara, who jointly developed Kudiyattam in its present form, incorporating many non-textual elements, especially those performed by the Vidushaka. Many of these elements, particularly the verbal elaborations rendered by the Vidushaka are closely related to another form of story-telling called *padhakam*, performed by the Nambiar community (who are associates of Chakyars in Kudiyattam) and the *prabandhakkuthu* of the Chakyars themselves. In both these narrative art forms, the performers used to explain the stories taken from the *Puranas* for the benefit of the common man. Anecdotes were embellished by equating them with situations in day-to-day life. There are many scholars who believe that Champu Kavyas\textsuperscript{39} came to be written in Manipravala mainly for the use of Chakyars for *prabandhakkuthu*.

These mono-actor, Chakyar Kuttu performances, despite the restriction of participation to caste Hindus and the location within the temple, represented an extension from Kuttiyattam that contributed further to the process of popularising performance, widening its appeal. The figure of Vidushaka and his role as commentator is here extended from the staging of Kuttiyattam performances, to the mono-actor, but not monologic, performances of Chakyar Kuttu. Other than the role of the Vidushaka/story-telling figure that narrates in the third person, the Chakyar introduces and subsequently embodies the story’s characters in the third and in the first persons. As the story progresses and the number of characters grows, the rhythm of interchange between narration and enactment crescendos. In the closing stages of a performance that I saw (Thiruvambadi Temple, Trichur, 23.12.‘91), in the company of local enthusiast Asha Menon, the actor, Ammanur Madhavar Chakyar, was providing for the embodiment of eight such inter-communicative voices.\textsuperscript{40}

In the same make-up and costuming as are found on Vidushaka, in Kuttiyattam, and with the same liberty to comment incisively on the foibles of human behaviour, the actor’s story-telling in Malayalam, provides for elaboration and a didactic commentary on the traditional stories and Sanskrit
texts. He is apt to make liberal references to particular spectators to add to his
humourous illustrations. My companion assured me that like the Vidushaka in
Kuttiyattam, the Chakyar Kuttu readily engages in social comment and
criticism, but his register of language always remains at a level higher than that
of common parlance, of popular speech, higher than that adopted by Vidushaka.
The next morning, with the assistance of Asha Menon as interpreter, I
interviewed Ammanur Madhavar Chakyar. The following notes are from the
transcript of that tape-recorded interview:

The make-up and costuming of the Chakyar Kuttu derive from the
comic figure of Vidushaka in Kuttiyattam.

Yes, it is in fact the same figure, but removed from the context of Kuttiyattam for
this single-actor performance as story-teller.

Although the costume and make-up are readily identifiable as being a
comic figure, the Chakyar may emote any mood that he considers appropriate to
the story. The make-up and costume remain the same, even if, in a performance
that lasts say, thirty days. The actor may be changed. However, the costume and
make-up will not. They have remained unchanged since the beginnings of
Kuttiyattam, over two thousand years ago.

There is a reference in the Mahabharata to a Sudra telling stories to the high
castes, to the Brahmans. Someone, possibly Vella Roudra, came along and
objected to this transgression and killed the story-teller. The others complained
that he should not have been killed as they were only listening to his stories. He
was restored to life. So the story-telling by Sudras was started up and then the
costuming and the make-up later developed.

The Chakyar may not begin to perform in the midst of Brahmans or higher
castes until he undergoes the ritual in which he is given the sacred thread to
wear. Only males are trained in the art and the skills are passed down from
father or uncle.

Ammanur Madhavar Chakyar got his sacred thread at the age of
eleven, after studying from early childhood with his uncle. At the time of
my interview he was seventy-five years old. He belongs to a family that
has had the misfortune not to produce many males and he was then
training only one nephew who himself had two young children who were
also undertaking training.

At first it was the kings who summoned the Chakyars for a performance,
but later temples assumed this role. There was no payment demanded for the
performance, because the Chakyar is imparting knowledge and no payment may
be demanded for this function. The system of Guru Dakshina was followed (whereby an ex gratia payment is made to the guru/Chakyar).

The performance space is usually within the precincts of the temple. However, the Chakyars no longer have a guaranteed income from land holdings or from the temple and they may have to look elsewhere to make their livelihood. There are conditions that proscribe performance in certain places, but there has been, since the land reforms of the 1950’s and the subsequent penury of many temple-performers, a flexibility that allows Chakyars to participate in such programs as the Festival of India, in auditoria, and so on.

Traditionally, if one was unable to make a living from the profession, one withdrew from worldly life into a temple community, probably in Varanasi. For eight years, after the reforms of the 1950’s, I stuck to the old traditions and remained entirely dependent on the temples for my livelihood, but the economic hardship was too great.

The opening rituals to the performance see the Chakyar enter the stage space, make salutations to the drummer, dance out a very squared, symmetrical pattern of steps and then, holding up symbolically a cloth before his face, engage in mantra or prayer.

Yes, these practices, which are immutable, are stipulated in the Natyasastra.

Within the temple performance space, there is a strong axis that is established by the alignment of the drummer/drum, the stool, the actor and the votive lamp, in a projected line towards the spectators.

Yes, it is immutable for the opening of the performance. It follows the axis of organisation that may be seen in the kuttampalam (temple theatre) of the Vadakkunathan Temple that stands in the centre of Trichur. The stool is the only prop: it serves as a seat, but also perhaps for the actor’s elevation to a mountain or the sky. I preferred that era before the introduction of the electric lamp, when the one, very large, traditional oil lamp provided a much stronger focus to my performance. The Chakyar is free, after the opening rituals, to move about the stage at will, but never beyond the oil lamp.

In the performance that I witnessed, the actor, at times, placed himself at the very limit of this lamp and, fixing his hands firmly on his knees for
Illustration 18:
Vidushaka in Kuttiyattam,
Old Kalamandalam, Cheruthuruthy, 27.11.'91
balance, leaned as far forward as possible, peering into the spectator space
and holding individuals in his gaze, to great effect.

The choice of the story remains with the Chakyar initially. If the temple
authorities, after some days, want to change to a different story, they make the
suggestion, as, indeed, may the spectators, but the decision remains with the
Chakyar.

According to Ammanur Madhavar Chakyar, the Chakyar must always
confine his remarks to the Sanskrit text that he quoted in the sloka that he gave
out before beginning his elaboration in Malayalam.

Even in commonplace Malayalam there are many Sanskritised words
which are familiar to everybody. The Sanskrit slokas are not only taken directly
from the Mahabharata or the Ramayana but also from elaboration of these texts
that has been done by other poets. Although there are forty or so stories that
have been elaborated, those commonly in use are only four or five.

When the Chakyar begins his elaboration of the Sanskrit sloka in
Malayalam, he has freedom to improvise, drawing on as many different
connotations of the words of the sloka as he chooses. However, he must always
be able to make some connections to the original text, for example, the many
different kinds of “love” and the curiosities of “love” that I drew upon in my
performance last night. It is the duty of the Chakyar to use his imagination to
impress upon the spectators whatever he sees as being the essential
characteristics of the discourse of particular characters.

Chakyar Kuttu performances take Kuttiyattam’s translator/commentator,
Vidushaka, out of the context of Sanskrit Drama and provide him with a
performance space that is at the centre of the temple space. This form provides
the actor with a Sanskrit sloka that is then to be elaborated by him in the
vernacular, even if a sometimes Sanskritised vernacular, with very wide latitude
for improvised social commentary on relevant current situations. These
structural dimensions of the Chakyar Kuttu performances, which are
popularising ones, are to be found in similar forms within Kathakali. The actors
and singers of Kathakali similarly elaborate particular Sanskrit slokas,
respectively, in mudra (gesture) and in sung Malayalam. The performances of
Kathakali that are associated with temple festivals are generally given in a
space, not in the temple proper, but immediately adjacent to it, in a public
square. In spatial terms, this emplacement does represent a further dimension of
popular appeal. However, Kathakali, in the context of rural temple festivals,
nevertheless retains strong suggestions of sacrality, particularly to the popular spectators, through its patronage by the temple committees and its spatial contiguity to the temple.

The dimension of sacralising performance, in Hindu India, must also be seen to reflect strong popular appeal; and possibly to generate it. Ritual performances, and the ritualising of performance by spectators, satisfy a manifestly religious tenor to living. This dimension is explored in some detail in Chapter Seven with reference to the interviews that I conducted. It suffices here to recall the popularity of the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and particularly of the god/hero Krishna’s exploits, to illustrate my point on the popular dimension of sacrality being sustained by performances.

In Chakyar Kuttu performances the dimension of sacrality is further sustained by the Chakyars having been inducted to the sacred thread, to a closer ritual proximity to the Brahmins, in order to undertake their temple responsibilities. Another close nexus with Brahmins becomes structurally, if not ritually, reinforced in that the Chakyar caste also provides the repository of offspring from Brahmin women and non-Brahmin fathers. The caste nexus between Chakyars and Brahmins used also to be reflected in their traditional patronage: traditionally, they performed only before caste Hindus, though this is no longer entirely the case. That traditional exclusion of non-caste spectators replicated, in the microcosm of the performance worlds, the traditionally rigid caste structure of Hindu India.

To draw a comparable observation on caste within the worlds of Kathakali: it was the Nairs who traditionally provided the performers. Just as their performance space is removed from the centre of the temple, so too are they ritually and socially more removed from the Brahmin centre than the Chakyars: unusually, they seem to straddle the Kshatria and the Sudra castes. However, the Nairs do have blood ties with the Brahmins, through those offspring that take the caste of their Nair mothers but remain outside the caste and ritual heritage of their Brahmin fathers. Traditionally, Nairs may have been fathered by Nairs or Brahmins, according to the liberal choosing of successive
husbands by Nair women. The Nairs, in Kathakali performance, however, traditionally performed before a group of spectators that was not discriminated by caste, even if historically their patronage was from Brahmin and ruling families, who were also connoisseurs.

**Krishnanattom/Ramanattom – the immediate progenitors of Kathakali.**

Here we have two closely related performance genres dedicated to two avatars of the god Vishnu, namely, Krishna and Rama. Krishna enjoys universal popularity in Hindu India and his cult following guarantees popular appeal to many forms of narration or enactment that unfold his deeds. The development of a performance genre, Krishnanattom, dedicated to portraying events from the life of Krishna, could not have been oblivious to the popular appeal that could be counted upon from devotees. Krishnattom is a performance genre that represents another development away from Sanskrit drama, widens appeal and retains its performance space right within the centre of the temple. Subsequently Krishnattom was to have close links with the genesis of Kathakali.

Popularity is generated at a narrative level by the cult fascination with stories of Krishna that are now staged in Krishnattom, through eight major episodes that are celebrated in the Puranic Krishna-legend. A further dimension of popularising is provided structurally in Krishnattom by amalgamating traditional folkloric dance patterns with more classical aspects from Sanskrit theatre traditions (Sukumar Azhicode, in Raja, 1981:i). I have earlier in this chapter referred to two streams of performance development, the one folkloric, which was closer to the ritual idiom of rural communities, and the other more classically developed through the genealogy of the *Natyasastra* and Sanskrit Drama. In Krishnanattom there was a conscious attempt to develop a form of performance that retained strong literary appeal from the sacred texts and drew on stage-craft that had been developed through Kuttiyattam, but which sought
also to capture more popular spectators. Two further dimensions of popular appeal were the thematic attraction to the Krishna cult followers and the dance-step association with popular, folkloric traditions, rather than strictly classical ones. Nevertheless, Krishnanattom was to remain, right up until recent times, confined to the temple space\(^1\) and thus hampered in its wider popular development.

There is, of course, a validating and legitimating legend associated with the traditional explanation of the emergence of this performance genre. The costumes of Krishnanattom are purportedly designed from the inspiration of a visionary who beheld Lord Krishna. In the enchantment of the vision, he rushed to embrace Krishna who evaded him and disappeared, but not before leaving behind one of the peacock feathers that adorn his crown. “It was this one feather that inspired the author to compose *Krishnageethi* and also to visualise the costumes of Krishna and, subsequently, of other characters” (Raja, 1988:4-5).

In terms of the evolution of more popular forms of theatre, Krishnanattom occupies a significant position, intermediary to Kuttiyattam and Kathakali. Its sibling genre, Ramanattom, in close imitation of Krishnanattom, provided for the enactment of stories of the life of that other avatar of the god Vishnu, Rama. The genesis of Ramanattom, is explained in traditional accounts as a form of protest, and in that first instance it may have been little more than a change of narrative and a change of name, with little adjustment to form. “It (was) the refusal of the Zamorin to send the Krishnanattom troupe to the Raja of Kottarakkara which provoked him to create Ramanattom” (Raja, 1988:5). However, Ramanattom was quickly and very directly to evolve into a quite different form, known as Kathakali.

The single group of performers that performed Krishnanattom initially, in the Seventeenth Century, did so only in the palace of the Zamorin. However, the troupe used to be sent to the temple at Guruvayor, a centre of great pilgrimage for devotees of Krishna, for nine-day cycles on occasions of dedication. (Subsequently, in January 1958, with the decline of the Zamorin’s fortune, the
Krishnanattom troupe was transferred to the Guruvayor Temple permanently.)

Raja (1988:5-6) elaborates this cycle:

“For eight days, plays were acted in serial order from Avatharam to Swargarohana but on the ninth day Avatharam was presented again to end the series auspiciously and indicate that the Lord is still with us. Krishnanattom is the story of Lord Krishna depicted in a series of eight separate dance dramas meant to be performed on eight successive nights. The series starts with the incarnation of Vishnu as Krishna, Avatharam (Incarnation), and is followed by Kalyamardan (The Suppression of Kaliya, the thousand-hooded serpent), Rasacreeda (Encounters with the Gopis and the Rasa dance), Kamsavadha (The Killing of Kamsa), Swayamvara (Marriage), Banayudha (The Fight with Bana), Vividavadha (The Killing of Vivida), and Swargarohana (The Ascent to Heaven).”

One of the innovations wrought by Krishnanattom was the introduction of two singers to the rear of the scenic space. This helped to free up the actors to attend to other aspects of the performance; it was also a strategy that was to be borrowed by Kathakali and used to much greater effect. However, the songs of Krishnattom were in pure Sanskrit (Raja, 1988:6), whereas Kathakali introduced the highly popular element of sung narrative in the vernacular, Malayalam.

In the company of my research assistant, Krishnan Kutty, I attended a Krishnanattom performance of the Swayamvara episode, at the Guruvayor temple on 23 January, 1992. The following remarks are drawn from my field notes on that occasion:

In comparison with a Kathakali performance, the range of mudras being executed by the actors seems very limited.

The performance seems to lack any evidence of an attempt at actor/spectator interaction. The spectators are not congregated close by the actors, but rather are seated on the floor about the temple space wherever they can find back-support from the temple pillars.

The significance of the performance being held right within the temple space strikes me in the following ways:

a) There is a shift from the “entertainment” element of performance skills and spectator interaction to the element of ritual “efficacy” (Schechner, 1976b), of devotional re-enactment.

b) The distribution of spectators is very much determined by the distribution of temple columns.

c) There is an element of “imposition” of performance, upon those involuntary spectators who are within the temple for a night’s vigil only because they want to make an early morning puja. Just outside the temple precincts there are sleeping mats, slumbering bodies and spaces under cover, for pilgrims.
d) There is an early departure from the performance by a significant number of spectator/devotees.

Perhaps my overall sense of a lack of energy in the performance is related not only to the apparent imprecision and under-statement of steps, gestures, eye and facial movements, but also to the devotional “efficacy” over popular “entertainment”. There seems to be an “indifference” which may be projected by both actors and spectators within the temple space. It is sufficient that the ritual be enacted.

In regard to what may be viewed as indifference to the performance and the sufficiency of ritual enactment, regardless of the attitude of participants, Schechner’s suggested continuum of efficacy /entertainment in performance helps explain my own reading of this event. Schechner (1976b: 218) says that “the difference between ritual, theatre, and ordinary life depends on the degree spectators and performers attend to efficacy, pleasure or routine; and how symbolic meaning and affect are infused and attached to performed events”. Efficacy in ritual is dependent upon right practice and enactment and it is upon this aspect that ritual participants are dependent, regardless of the degree that it might also offer entertainment to the onlookers. Schechner (1976b: 211) implies this sufficiency of enactment in his statement that “ritual is an event upon which its participants depend; theatre is an event which depends on its participants”. In comparing Krishnattom with Kathakali (See interview with Iyyamkode Sreedharan, 2.1.’92, reported in Chapter Eight), Sreedharan is unwittingly providing support to the efficacy/entertainment continuum raised by Schechner, when Sreedharan notes that Krishnanattom has “stagnated because it is regarded as a ‘religious’ art form”. This statement provides further illustration of the indifference, of which I speak, to the degree of entertainment value in what Sreedharan calls “religious” and what I am referring to as “efficacious”, in terms of Schechner’s discussion.

The emergence of Ramanattom in the Seventeenth Century, in protest against the unavailability of the Zamorin’s Krishnattom troupe, was itself quickly to develop into the tradition of Kathakali. These formative processes crystallised when the Rajah of Kottarakara wrote plays based on the Hindu epic, Ramayana, in Sanskritised Malayalam (Bolland, 1988:1). Zarrilli (in Richmond et al, 1990:317) makes the point that Krishnanattom was largely
third person in its references, whereas Ramanattom contained less third person narrative and more first person dialogue in the local language, Malayalam. He goes on to note that the emphasis on dance in Krishnanattom gave a diminished focus to facial expression and hand gestures, which in Kathakali were to become highly developed, along with other more virtuosic dramatic techniques developed from Kuttiyattam.

**Kalarippayatt – martial art contributing to movement in Kathakali**

To the uninitiated and the untrained spectator, the highly choreographed exercise and training routines of Kalarippayatt provide high-energy performance spectacle. It is, in fact, the traditional martial art of the Nairs of Kerala. Along with ritual performance genres and the classical traditions of performance that have come through Kuttiyattam and have already been outlined above, Kalarippayatt must be included as one of the three major formative influences (Zarrilli, 1984:41) on Kathakali. The highly energetic training routines for the development of Kathakali actors have been derived directly from the martial practices of the Nair *kalari* (martial gymnasia) of Kerala. Zarrilli has made a very detailed study of training practices in both Kathakali and Kalarippayatt and I am grateful for the access that I have had to notes from his then unpublished book on the latter. The energetic precision of the movements expounded by Kathakali actors distinguish it very greatly from all of the other performance genres that I refer to in this Chapter.
Nascent Kathakali – a popular move, out of the temple and into the square, and into the vernacular.

Prior to the beginnings of Kathakali there had existed a kind of dance-drama, known as Krishnanattom, the development of which has been widely attributed to Manaveda, Zamorin of Calicut. It drew upon the traditions of the folk dance, Ashtapadiyattam (A. Sreedhara Menon, 1991:365). Subsequently, the Raja of Kottarakara developed a tradition similar to Krishnanattom known as Ramanattom, which, as the change in name implies, was based no longer on the stories of Krishna, but on those of Rama, each of whom is considered by Hindus to be a reincarnation of the god Vishnu. These two forms of performance provided the direct line of generation for Kathakali, as Ramanattom was later to become known. Popular belief provides a motive for the Raja of Kottarakara to have undertaken this initiative: “as a measure of retaliation against the Zamorin who refused to accede to his request to send the Krishnanattom troupe to his kingdom” (A Sreedhara Menon, 1991:365).

The Rajah (Tampuran) of Kottarakara ruled a small principality in Travancore, and wrote plays (1660-1680) based on the Ramayana in a Sanskritised form of Malayalam. According to the historian P.K.Parmeswaran Nair (1967:85), “It found an immediate welcome from the people”. Previously, the tales related to the Hindu epics had also been recounted by popular narrator-performers in the vernacular, in mono-actor performance genres, such as Chakyar Kuttu, which was performed within the temple proper and is described above, and Thullal, a more folkloric genre which took its sung narratives and accompanying dance steps, into spaces outside the temples. Certainly, diverse aspects of other performance genres, such as these two mono-actor forms, can be traced within Kathakali. However, these influences of Krishnanattom and Ramanattom most directly became crystallised into the beginnings of a new form of performance when the first Kathakali plays were written (Kottarakkara Tampuran, 1555-1605) with no longer only the learned few but also the ordinary people in mind. The act of writing plays predominantly in Malayalam rather than Sanskrit and the locating of Kathakali performances outside the
temple precincts were factors that provided for wider appeal to the more popular dimensions of Kathakali, such as, the highly energetic dance patterns, colourful costume and make-up and sung narratives accompanied by percussive music from folkloric traditions.

The medium of Malayalam was adopted for the sung narration of epic literature within this dance-drama and the use of Sanskrit became relegated to key *slokas*, the master motifs which were subsequently to be elaborated in dance, in mudras, in acting and in the sung narrative. This language shift in Kathakali represented a dissolving of the boundaries of elitism that had been sustained by performances given primarily in the ritual language of Sanskrit. Kathakali represented a revolution not only within the microcosm of performance but also in the Hindu macrocosm that was ritually delineated by the Nambudiri Brahmin hegemony. By this language shift alone, the popular usurped the elitist in a large measure, in the microcosm of performance. The tolerance and patronage shown to this new form remained firmly within the political will of members of the upper-castes, who constituted the principal patrons. However, the pro-popular change, as a latent political ramification, heralded much more than simply the affirmative prospect of further change.

This shift in language opened up, in performance terms, a process of concurrent, if not simultaneous, translation that provided instruments of learning for the illiterate, and for the mass of the populace without Sanskrit. This instrument for learning, a process of translation both from the brief Sanskrit slokas and from the very extensive use of the language of mudras into the popular vernacular Malayalam, provided a measure of empowerment through self-education. Along with all of its theatrical trappings, Kathakali represented a major step in the process of instruction not only in the narrative details of the performance but also in its performance competencies. Its translational processes are empowering to its spectators, but at the same time they provide for a major socio-cultural shift away from elitist exclusion to greater inclusion, a process which itself has political implications. The dance and drama elements of Kathakali are more popular codes of performance while the retention of Sanskrit slokas marks a more elitist performance code, that of
theatre of the word. These popular/elitist distinctions and the opportunities for learning through translation in Kathakali are explored further in the extensive interviews that I provide in Chapter Seven.

Conclusions

Both historically and contemporarily, one can trace the patterns of evolution in terms of performance genres that have contributed to Kathakali. These processes for change have involved extensions beyond prior sets of performance conventions and the evolution of new sets for new genres, as for example in the shifts from Kuttiyattam to Krishnanattom to Kathakali, which mark a lineage through the classical prescriptions set out in the *Natyasastra*. Or they may follow a lineage through more folkloric traditions, such as the rituals of Teyyam and Tiyyata. However, they all enable to some degree inter-textual cross-pollination in the semiosis of performances, particularly amongst more popular and less performance-competent spectators. The diverse readings of performances of Kathakali may allow for individuals who are less competent in the specific performance culture to import from one genre to another notions of sacrality and, within that context, also ritual associations of Brahmin influence and of religious symbolism.
Chapter Five - Caste, Colonialism, Land Reforms and Kathakali Patronage

Introduction

Particular caste responsibilities, the division of labour in Hindu India, included the delegation of diverse responsibilities in traditional and classical performance genres (Richmond, Swann and Zarrilli, 1990; Panikkar 1991; Raja, 1988; True Jones, 1983; Zarrilli 1992). Particular castes in Kerala that have played a dominant role in the development of Kathakali have included the Nambudiri Brahmins, the local Kshatria rulers, and the Nairs. The socio-economic shaping of Kerala, expressed in terms of relative caste status, has had considerable influence on the shaping of Kathakali’s patronage. The changes in socio-economic status of one caste relative to another were influenced by the long period of colonial government by the British in India and, in this century, by political struggle and eventual reforms, particularly in land ownership. This chapter looks at some of the factors that have shaped socio-economic status within the caste structure and their eventual influence upon the shaping of Kathakali patronage.

The development of Kathakali was very much from within the context of traditional and classical performance genres and the martial arts of Hindu culture in Kerala. Although it appeared relatively recently and at the time of colonial rule, Kathakali remained untouched by direct colonial influences on the performance conventions that shaped it. It has drawn eclectically on superficial elements of costuming from diverse cultures and some would argue that it should not be regarded as exclusively Hindu performance (See Iyyamkode Sreedharan’s interview reported in Chapter Eight). Sreedharan points out, for example, that the female consorts of Kathakali’s heroic characters are dressed in costumes that relate to the traditions of India’s Muslim community and not to Hindu India. Again in relation to costuming, Bolland (1988:6) asserts that the wide-brimmed head-dress worn by the Monkey God,
Hanuman, in Kathakali was copied from the helmets worn by French troops fighting in India in the Seventeenth century. In recent years, themes from European classics, for example, *Odysseus* and *King Lear*, have been transcribed to performance in Kathakali and aimed primarily at a foreign public. Nowadays Kathakali can be seen in proscenium-arch theatres of the European tradition and is no longer confined to the traditional performance spaces in village squares adjacent to the temples. However, the conventions that relate to the traditional performance structure of Kathakali were developed in a local Hindu context and were not directly influenced by colonial rule.

An indirect influence of British colonialism on the worlds of Kathakali has perhaps been wrought through changes in relative socio-economic status within the caste system. Tangentially, one may find the impetus for organised political struggle in a response to colonialism and, subsequently, through continued struggle in a different direction, eventual changes to the education system and to the patterns of land ownership. The catalyst of British occupation to the development of Kerala’s reform movements and the models of revolution drawn from Europe and Russia surely had an indirect role to play in the eventual socio-economic reshaping of Kerala and therefore on the patronage of Kathakali. However, Kathakali’s traditional performance conventions do not directly relate to the influences that the colonisers may have imported to other performance worlds in colonial India.

The land reforms that were eventually to bring radical change to the socio-economic patterns of Kerala did have a very marked effect upon the traditional performance worlds and in particular upon the patronage of Kathakali. The protest movements that eventually led to these reforms and the outcomes produced by them are also explored in this chapter.
The Injustices of Caste-ism and the Impetus for Reform

The Code of Manu (?600BC-AD300?), called the Lawgiver, in its present form consists of 2,685 verses divided into twelve books. Book X is “about the origins, development and rules for caste”; while Book XI in a discussion of the general laws of morality includes “penance and expiation for sins, particularly sins against caste” (Walker, 1983, vol. II: 28-29). Walker says that “the chief design of the Code seems to have been to give divine sanction to the institutions of caste, to make caste supreme in India and the Brahmins supreme among the castes”. Nowadays, although it tends to be held in great reverence by the Brahmins, the Code of Manu is “execrated by the lower castes, who regard it virtually as a blueprint of Brahmin domination, a flagrant piece of Brahminical imposture, which they make a make a point of publicly burning at their processions.”

The injustices and oppressive dimensions of the caste system and the Brahman-centric organisation of society could no longer be tolerated towards the end of the Nineteenth Century and there were the beginnings of local protests. The traditional patronage for Kathakali derived from the wealth and power that were commanded by its principle patrons, the Nambudiri Brahmins of Kerala and local rulers, from the Kshatria caste. The landholdings that sustained that patronage were ultimately to be the target of radical reforms; reforms that were achieved in the 1960’s but which grew out of the initial protests such as that made by Ayyankali in the late Nineteenth century. Franke and Chasin (1992:71) recount his protest:

In 1893 a Kerala man named Ayyankali travelled in a bullock cart along a public road. His simple act constituted a major public protest against a centuries-old system of indignity that required “untouchables” like him to observe numerous restrictions on their movements. He should have walked. He should have called out his presence to any higher caste persons so that they could avoid coming into contact with him or even close to him. He should have been prepared to get off the road altogether in the presence of men of certain higher castes, who might otherwise have killed him on the spot.

Ayyankali’s stance was not the only measure of protest in the long struggle against caste oppression in Kerala; a struggle which was to find a
major turning point only when the newly-founded state of Kerala elected to its Legislative Assembly a majority from the Communist Party of India in 1957. The privileges and responsibilities that were defined by caste in Kerala had a determining influence on the shaping of patronage for performance, on the economics and on the aesthetics of performance, on the various roles of producers and consumers of performance. The historical factors that re-shaped the traditional patterns of patronage for and participation in Kathakali are to be found in the radical re-shaping of Kerala’s social and political structures.

All over India the caste system had sorted people, according to their birth, into rigid categories of wealth and power, or into degrees of poverty and powerlessness. This was done according to their membership of four broad castes, Brahmin, Kshatria, Vaisya, Sudra, or else according to their exclusion as caste-less members of society. While the responsibilities of the Brahmins lay in prayer, worship and religious instruction, the concerns of the Kshatria lay in warfare, those of the Vaisya in commerce and husbandry and those of the Sudra in service, in a system of economic interdependence. This broad varna idiom of a four-fold system of caste Hindus, and of outcasts to that system, is one way of viewing caste across all of India. However, the more local perspective, through the idiom of jatis has also been used effectively for studies carried out over the last several decades (Béteille, 1996:98). In this latter perspective, caste is seen according to the thousands of sub-groups that are defined by occupation and governed by strict conventions establishing inter-group and intra-group relations. Béteille (1996:99) elaborates characteristics of jati in terms of autonomy and of socio-economic interdependence:

The caste system is not only a hierarchical system, but it is also the basis of an elaborate division of labour. Every caste, or jati, however broadly or narrowly one may define it, evinces two characteristics: (1) autonomy in certain spheres, such as marriage and kinship; and (2) dependence upon other castes in other spheres, such as economics and ritual services.

We have already seen in the case of Kathakali and its contiguous performance genres that the role of major participants and the allocation of their particular performance responsibilities are established according to
specific castes. “Social honour in the caste system is very closely tied to ritual values. Styles of life which are highly esteemed are generally associated with large numbers of ritual restrictions” (Béteille, 1996:188). Although the traditional system was rigid, it has not been utterly inflexible.

Justifications for maintaining the caste structure have traditionally been argued on social and religious grounds. “One way of doing this was through the concepts of purity and pollution. The higher castes were richer, more powerful, and pure. The lowest castes were impoverished, powerless, and so polluted that the higher castes considered them untouchable.” (Franke and Chasin, 1992:71-74). This solely religious perspective is, however, rather simplistic and it ignores the complexity of political issues that have driven change in Kerala. The dynamics of change involve perspectives of both caste and of class. In principle, and to some extent in practice, classes are open, but castes are not. Theoretically, movement within the caste system was held to be inadmissible but in practice there is some movement (Béteille, 1992:190).

At the top of Hindu India’s caste system are the Brahmins and at the top of Kerala’s caste system are the Nambudiri Brahmins, the Brahmins of Malabar. Once they were the major patrons and curators of the traditions of Kathakali. They continue to play a major role as advocates for and arbiters of the aesthetics of Kathakali. Members of the Brahmin caste, the priestly caste, were primarily inheritors and curators of all religious ritual and, as such, wielded great power over the hierarchical social organisation of all castes, including the martial caste, the Kshatriyas, from whose ranks the rajahs, the rulers of temporal government were drawn. Through an understanding of the highly articulated, zealously detailed regulation of daily life that was formerly imposed by the Brahmin-centric caste structure, one might better appreciate the remnant politics embedded in current aesthetical discourses within Kathakali, which later emerge in the voices of respondents to my interviews. Ravindran (1980:78) elaborates the relationship between unapproachability and impurity:

Right of way was decided by one’s caste in the case of Hindus. Higher castes shunned the lower castes because they believed that their touch or even approach within a certain distance caused pollution to them. Untouchability was a matter only of actual contact, but unapproachability implied the idea that the
untouchables had an emanation of impurity extending to a certain distance. As a result, orthodox Hindus in Kerala did not permit the lower castes not only to come into actual contact with them but also to approach them within a prescribed distance. This necessitated the prevention of out-castes from entering roads, schools, offices, and other public places.

India’s Brahmins were, and remain, the curators of the knowledge of Hindu ritual. Historically, theirs was the highest level of education. This was so not only in the priestly, intercessional role which allowed them to dictate the ritualistic minutiae of the fastidious regulations that governed the lives of all orthodox Hindus. The Brahmins regulated the extension of the temple space geographically, economically, socially and psychologically to permeate all aspects of living. Their religious status reinforced their economic and political positions and vice-versa (Béteille, 1996:191; Franke and Chasins, 1992:71-85; Ravindran, 1980:77-104; Spear, 1990, (Vol.II): p.111, p.248, p.198).

Knowledge of Sanskrit\textsuperscript{47}, the language of the sacred texts and of ritual in Hinduism, imbued the Brahmins of Kerala with elitist status and a more highly mystified aura, providing them with instruments of manipulation. Malayalam\textsuperscript{48}, the vernacular of Kerala, is of Dravidian\textsuperscript{49} origin and although, along with the other languages of the same group, it has been gradually Sanskritised to some degree, it does not enjoy the closely derivative relationship that languages of the north of India have with Sanskrit. Knowledge of Sanskrit further separated Kerala’s high-caste elite from the vernacular of Malayalam.

I mention now, in parenthesis, that within the microcosmic worlds of performance in Kerala, the shifting balance between the predominant use of Sanskrit or of the vernacular, Malayalam, across diverse performance genres continued to reflect, from the wider social macrocosm, the relative exclusiveness of high-caste spaces, particularly in regard to theatre of the word. The progressively wider use of Malayalam, as for example in the sung narratives of Kathakali and the reduction of Sanskrit usage to brief opening slokas, represents a relative diminution of an exclusive dimension of Brahman-centric social organisation. In performance terms it also represents a popularising dimension.
The 1893 protest of Ayyankali, described above, was waged against the entire caste system. Its particular transgression was against the oppressive rights of way that governed the movements of Kerala’s peoples. It is widely acknowledged that Kerala had a very rigid and elaborate caste structure, a system that prompted the nineteenth-century reformer Swami Vivekenand to call Kerala “a mad-house of caste” (in Franke and Chasin, 1992:75). Ravindran (1980:77) elaborates the extreme observation of caste distinction that prevailed in Kerala:

In keeping up ceremonial observances and caste distinctions, in invoking traditions and customs to regulate social life, South India was more bigoted and reactionary than North India; and strangely enough, of all places in South India, Kerala, particularly. Travancore and Cochin took the sin of pride in the matter of extending the limits of caste pollution to unapproachability and even unseeability. Caste system here brought into being a peculiar social milieu, the like of which no eye had seen or heart conceived anywhere else in the world, wherein a Hindu’s approach near another Hindu was strictly conditioned by the superior - inferior relation of each to caste hierarchy.

**Kingship and the Brahmanical Institutions**

The pre-colonial perspective of relations between local rulers, the Kshatria caste, and Brahmins may have been quite different from the way that these relations were shaped under British colonialism. Dirk’s view of the nature of the pre-colonial relationship between the kings and the Brahmins depicts one in which the knowledge of the Brahmins was used to enhance the status of kingship and their most important contribution was to augment the honour of the Raja. Dirks (1993:249) says:

The Brahmins themselves became emblems of the king’s sovereignty and honour. Further many of the Brahmins were given lands with the specific injunction to pray for the prosperity of the king and his kingdom. The very presence of the learned Brahmins in the state was thought to transform its character, making the soil sweet and fertile, and the kingdom as a whole prosperous”.

Dirk’s understanding of the pre-colonial relationship between kingship and the Brahmins contrasts strongly with the changing role of Brahmins under
the British, whereby, in his view, the crown was rendered “hollow” as the colonial rulers sought to detach caste from politics. The journals of a British clergyman travelling in the area in 1840-41 provide information on the degree of Brahmin influence through a description of an acquaintance, a highly accomplished sovereign, Swati Tirunal. In addition, he provides the colonial tendency of Christian bigotry and abhorrence of Brahminism that was characteristic of the British occupiers in that period. Of Swati Tirunal, Ravindran (1980:88) recounts:

He speaks English with perfect fluency, is an accomplished Persian and Arabic scholar, and is in other respects unusually well-informed, having had the advantage of a much better education than commonly falls to the lot of oriental princes. Could he escape the swaddling bands of the Brahmins, it is supposed that he would shew himself a really enlightened ruler. This, however, seems almost impossible, as these crafty priests have thrown their meshes so effectively around him that he can scarcely stir hand or foot without their permission. They possess unbudded influence over his mind, the influence which can only be attained by superstition, and the puppet of royalty is moved according to their will and pleasure by the Brahmanical string. It is very much to be lamented as unquestionably he might do, and probably has the inclination to do, much for his country, which now remains undone. Certainly their terrible religion is the bane and curse of India. The Brahmanical superstition hangs over the land like an impervious murky vapour and seems to defy the sun of truth to scatter it. The Brahmins are still all-powerful and are held by the other castes as something far better than men and very little inferior to Gods. If there were no such people as Brahmins, Trivandrum would be a little centre of civilization, which would eventually produce a most beneficial effect throughout Southern India.

In both the pre-colonial and the colonial perspectives of the relationship between rulers and Brahmins outlined above there are very clear political dimensions expressed. In the former we are shown the Brahmins being instrumentalised to the enhancement of kingship; in the latter Brahmins are depicted as the puppeteers manipulating kingship to their own purposes. The political dimension of the relations shown by these two perspectives is undeniable. However, there is a perspective of caste, promulgated by Dumont and others, in which politics seems to be ignored and the ritual organisation of society according to the principle of purity/pollution becomes the key to understanding caste relations. In this view, in descending order from the Brahmins, people are grouped according to Hindu principles of “purity”, and that arrangement also reflects approximately their wealth and status. At the bottom of this hierarchy are the “untouchables”. This labelling designates not
only their exclusion from the notional, religious and ritual “purity” but also provides an index to the dirty, demeaning work that they did. “This included labour in the muddy fields, handling corpses of animals and humans, washing menstrual garments of high-caste women, and cleaning faeces from the latrines of the higher-caste households” (Franke and Chasin, 1992:71-74).

The perspective on pre-colonial caste relations provided by Dirks stands in contradiction of the perspective presented by Dumont. Dirks argues specifically that “caste was embedded in a political context of kingship”. This view meant, among other things, that “the prevalent ideology had not to do, at least primarily, with purity and pollution, but rather with royal authority and honour, and associated notions of power, dominance and order” (Dirks, 1993:7).

Dirks (1995:xxii) has asserted that “caste was not the single dominant metonym and trope of social difference in pre-colonial India”. In doing so he focuses on kingship and argues that it was not until the emergence of British rule in India that the crown came to be considered “hollow”. In his view (1995:4), which is antithetical to Dumont’s scheme, until the British effectively manipulated the caste system, “Kings were not inferior to Brahmins; the political domain was not encompassed by a religious domain”. Dirks (1993:8) goes on to argue that the British, having settled on the policy of indirect rule by a variety of means, found that it was not only convenient to detach caste from politics but that it was necessary to do so.51

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**The Inter-relations of the Brahmins and the Nairs**

**in Kerala Society and in Kathakali.**

In pre-reform times, the economic might and the leisure time that derived from high-caste membership in a feudally organised hierarchy enabled this elite to take both a creative and a patronising interest in the development of
performance arts. The microcosm of the performance worlds mirrored the wider social structure and its dominant cultural values. It did so through, for example, the division of labour and the narrative and performative elaboration of those cultural values. The performance worlds were no less subject to the religious, aesthetic and political dictates of these more-leisured castes, the rajas, drawn from the Kshatrias, and the Brahmins. It is to the Rajah (Tampuran) of Kottarakara, who lived in the latter part of the seventeenth century and the early part of the eighteenth century, that the origins of Kathakali have been attributed (Bolland, 1980). Historically, those rulers who patronised the nascent form of Kathakali were joined by other traditional patrons from “Kerala’s highest castes: Nambudiri Brahmans, Tampurans and some Nairs”(Zarrilli, 1984:265). However radical and popularising the changes in performance genres to include Malayalam may have been, and however much the process co-involved the upper castes in the development of Kathakali, the rigours of the caste system in Kerala, according to certain scholars, continued to impact upon inter-caste dealings and intra-caste regulation within these upper echelons.

The conservation of the wealth and power that had accrued to the priestly caste, particularly to the Nambudiri Brahmans, depended upon maintaining tight control over the ownership of land. The regulation of inheritance provided for the first-born male who gained all. Marriage laws allowed only the first born son to marry orthodoxly within his caste. The two processes in combination ensured that the other sons, and the women of the caste suffered their own respective curtailments and oppression. The inheritance system guaranteed that the land would not, over time, be partitioned and some sons missed out. The marriage system meant that many Nambudiri women would never have the opportunity to marry, there not being enough first-born sons; and inter-caste marriage was denied them, as was exposure to male company outside their own households. “Because men could have more then one wife, some Nambudiri girls were betrothed to elderly, already married men. When married to these aged men, however, their lives
may not have been very different from those of their unmarried sisters” (Franke and Chasin, 1992:91).

The Nair caste, in many respects, cuts across the boundaries of the traditional four major caste groupings. Nairs occupied, at the higher level, a position just below the Brahmins, but at the lower level were classified as Sudras, the lowest of the four general castes. The functions carried out in society by the Nairs cover roles that were traditionally allocated to widely different caste groups, among them a martial role, which belongs to the Kshatriyas, and, eventually, within Kathakali, a performance role.

The Nair kalari (martial arts training) system was to contribute much to the development of Kathakali. Zarrilli (1984:106), whose considerable research in Kerala extends across both Kathakali training processes and the traditional system of martial training known as Kalarippayatt, points out that it was not only the massage system of Kathakali that was drawn from this system but also specific exercise techniques. There was a gradual transformation of these exercises to Kathakali’s own aesthetics.

The traditional legacy of the Nairs to Kathakali included not only their martial heritage of highly disciplined and energetic training programs but also their mobility. Both the martial and the performance responsibilities call for the flexibility to leave the household, on short notice, and perhaps for extended periods.

The matriliny (Franke and Chasin, 1992:90-94) that structured the social and economic organisation of the Nairs provided a measure of reciprocity to the patriarchal dictates of the Nambudiris. Nair land and family membership was held collectively through their women, who in turn enjoyed great flexibility in their choice of successive husbands. These two mirrored marriage systems well adapted to the needs of the younger sons of Brahmin households, who could not marry within their own caste. The sexual relations that resulted between the two castes indirectly reinforced the higher status that the Nairs had
attained. Although the Nambudiri men might have provided some financial support for their Nair off-spring, they had no formal obligations towards them. Both Nair and Brahmin men might have become temporary husbands to Nair women, but paternity of off-spring was not an issue. Their family membership was determined by their mother’s kinship group (Franke and Chasin, 1992:92). The responsibility for their upbringing in the martial and performing arts customarily fell to their maternal uncles.

Although local rulers have penned Kathakali plays, historically the performance microcosm of Kathakali has also been shaped by the two caste groups of Nambudiri Brahmins and Nairs. The former held such power as to be able to influence orthodoxy of the aesthetical, moral and social codes for all castes of Hindu Kerala and promulgated their view through their direct patronage of Kathakali. The latter also provided the performers and the basis for training systems that would mark Kathakali distinctively with its highly energetic, martial and heroic style.

**Land Reforms and the Re-shaping of Wealth and Patronage**

The land reforms of 1969 in Kerala initiated a very radical restructuring not only of land ownership, but also of the traditional systems of patronage of performance. The major change in the patronage of Kathakali was from direct support by Brahmin families to increased support from temple committees in conjunction with temple festivals. However, the legislation of 1969 was the culmination of other identifiable socio-political dynamics that had been operating in Kerala for some decades.

The achievements of widespread education in Kerala began as a response in the Nineteenth century to the English language schools being set up by Christian missionaries and, after the 1830’s by the British colonial
government. Western education brought social prestige and also new economic opportunities with managerial and administrative positions. These were monopolised by the Brahmins and forged a closer relationship between the Brahmins and the colonial rulers (Béteille, 1996:209). The local rulers counteracted Christian and elitist schools by setting up Malayalam-language government schools. By 1902 lower grade education was mandatory, even if in practical terms not always achievable, and in 1911-12 caste restrictions in government schools were formally abolished. With independence from the British in 1947, plans were laid for an adult literacy program in Travancore (Franke and Chasin, 1992:50).

From the turn of the century there had sprung up caste improvement associations and protest movements. “In the thirties the Self-Respect Movement started carrying anti-Brahmin feelings to the masses…Brahmins were denounced [by some newspapers] for their arrogance and the pursuit of their narrow group interests” (Béteille, 1996:211). Agitation resulted in the Travancore Temple Entry Act of 1936 (Franke and Chasin, 1992:51) which broke down caste discrimination. Alliances were formed between these agitators and the radical left and workers movements. Anthropologist Kathleen Gough, who has made a long study of Kerala politics, makes the point that “it is the Communists who eat in the homes and tea shops of Harijans [former untouchables], organise drama clubs among them, file suits on their behalf, and agitate for fixed tenures, higher wages, and a share in the land” (Gough, 1970:149). The 1933 Madras Nambudiri Act reformed inheritance practices and allowed for the partitioning of family property. It gave junior sons the right to marry and to receive inheritance and provided women with an entitlement to share property. These achievements were wrought by the sustained agitation of radical young Nambudiris who were later to become leaders in Kerala’s Independence movement and also in the Kerala Communist Party (Franke and Chasin, 1992:93). In the late Nineteenth Century and early Twentieth century Indian male social reformers had attacked the traditional system of matrilineal joint households and several Nair Marriage and Inheritance Acts were passed. In the process the relative sexual freedom of Nair women was destroyed (Franke and Chasin, 1992:94).
There were four major components to the Land reform Act of 1969 passed by the Kerala government: (1) the establishing of a rice levy and the opening of Fair Price Shops; (2) the imposing of a ceiling on the size of landholding and the redistributing of land; (3) the abolition of tenancy rent from operators to non-cultivating landlords; (4) the abolition of tenancy in house-compound land, thus abolishing rent to landlords (Franke and Chasin, 1992:54). This process of giving land to the tiller saw the landlord class of mostly high-caste Brahmin temple priests and rent recipients become school teachers, government administrators and medium sized farmers (Franke and Chasin, 1992:94).

In general terms, the temples, which were still the communal epicentre of Brahmin influence, often became the source of sustenance to those performers whose families previously enjoyed the direct patronage of Brahmin families within their domestic compounds. Traditional patterns of livelihood were in upheaval in the performance worlds.

The land reforms, and their socialist underpinnings, however, provided for socio-economic changes that have resulted today in universal education and almost one hundred percent literacy in the current generation. There is a fair distribution of schools and clinics, linked by good roads and public transport systems, in even the most rural and previously remote areas of the state. There is a general steeping in political awareness that has been indexed to this high level of general education. Life expectancy, particularly that of females, is much higher than elsewhere in India. In all of these, Kerala now stands out from other Indian states as the enviable model.

Regardless of the changes of post-colonial times and particularly of the impact of land reforms upon it since 1969, the caste system seemingly continues to influence the respective roles of patrons, performers and spectators in the world of Kathakali, but to a lesser degree. This influence, though diminished, is borne out by my field interviews, which reveal reactionary or progressive responses that seem to reflect nostalgia for the pre-reform Brahmin-centric structures or their support for the weakening of the
hegemony that prevailed prior to land reforms. The radical land reforms that sought to redress the gross imbalances of wealth in Kerala impacted indirectly upon the patterns of patronage of Kathakali and upon the kinds of messages that were being promulgated via performance in the world of Kathakali. The strong reverberations and repercussions, both of the caste system and of its appeal to religious grounds, continue to characterise current disputes on the aesthetics of Kathakali. Still the trope of purity/pollution continues to arise. The following three excerpts from my own interviews illustrate the point:

(In earlier times,) you know one would not enter the Green Room with footwear on. One would not go in and smoke. Nowadays, after having made up artistes are sitting and smoking. I personally used to fast in preparation for an evening of Kathakali. (A ritual dimension?) Yes, for me a ritual. (An attempt to change your awareness, your consciousness?) Yes, that's right. (Repeated the question regarding the most important features that the subject got from an evening of Kathakali.)

*It is my own understanding of the Puranic characters and appreciation of their feelings and situations. How effectively its purity...*(Interview with Balakrishnan, Palghat, 20.12.’92; trailed off at this point.)

*Kathakali in its present form is not in its pure condition. It has been adulterated. “Pure condition” means Kathakali in its origin, that is, as introduced by Kothayath.* (Interview, Radha Krishnan, Mangod, 12.12.’92)

In the above perspectives, Kathakali is seen as a classical form existing in some imagined state of “original purity”, which is supported by an appeal to the Puranic texts as the significant source of stories.

Strong opposition to the above classical, purist, religious position is promulgated by the following, secular perspective.

...“Appreciation” means “total appreciation”. They are criticising me for “diluting” Kathakali or “polluting” the classical form. My critics are arguing for an elite form of Kathakali. I am arguing for the people. What is the aim of art? What is the use of art? It is for the people. My critics are ignoring the developments that constitute the history of Kathakali.

*The notion of “purity” is an absurdity because we are changing and adapting constantly through time, taking up ideas from so many places. We cannot talk about “purity”.* (Iyyamkode Sreedharan, interviewed at Kollengode, Palghat District, 2.2.’92)
Conclusions

Under the British colonial government, following Dirk’s account, the Nambudiri Brahmins of Kerala enjoyed an increase in their sphere of influence vis-à-vis local rulers. In this account, British policy of indirect government sought to manipulate caste division and to foster the notion of it being a religious rather than a political structure. The long established Code of Manu provides for a rationale for this British positioning, by its moral argument and religious underpinning as the justification of caste-ism. The perspective of caste promulgated by Dumont within which caste is seen to be organised on a principle of purity/pollution, though antithetical to Dirk’s account, can also be supported by reference to Manu’s Code. Together they focus one on the political outcomes that are inextricably involved in the shaping of society by caste-ism, even if underlying religious motivation can be ascribed to the purity/pollution principle and the Code of Manu.

In Kerala at the turn of this century, caste restrictions were very severe and the notion of “un-touchability” had been extended to “un-approachability” for the lowest orders of society. The temple spaces, the epicentres of Brahmin ritual, were denied to the lowest social orders. The temples allowed for the Brahmin-centric organisation of society and the same temple spaces also functioned as performance spaces. When Kathakali performances took their place in the village squares adjacent to the temples, they provided also a mirroring of caste structure through the division of labour and through the narrative and performative promulgation of cultural values elaborated by Brahmin influence.

In Kerala the upper Nair caste is hierarchically close to the Brahmins. The Nairs have traditionally provided performers for Kathakali. The close nexus between these two castes can be identified in their performance responsibilities and patronage of Kathakali. It also lies within their blood-links through the traditional patterns of socio-sexual behaviour of the Nambudiri Brahmins. The Nairs, in the diversity of their occupational roles, covering areas associated traditionally with both Sudra and Kshatriya castes, have
provided for the crossing of categories of traditional caste demarcation. They
have also provided for the conjunction of martial and performance
responsibilities, a coincidence which has provided much to the energetic forms
of Kathakali.

The caste division of labour and the cultural values promulgated by the
brahmanical institutions were reflected in the performance worlds that enjoyed
Brahmin patronage, among them Kathakali. Under the British, the Brahmins
influenced the aesthetic, as well as the political agendas of Kerala, through the
caste system. Indian Independence in 1945, the founding of the State of Kerala
in 1957 and the promulgation of significant state legislation regarding
education, caste discrimination, inheritance rights, marriage laws and most
significantly the land reforms of 1969 brought radical change to traditional
social structures. Brahmin influence, although more questioned since those
events, has nevertheless been a major factor in the eventual shaping of the
worlds of Kathakali and upon resistance to changes within them.
Chapter Six: Myth and Intertextuality

Traditional Indian “historiography”, when it is referred to at all, is most often characterised as fabulous legend and religious myth, bearing no relation to the past succession of real events (Dirks, 1993:55).

Introduction

Myth underpins Hinduism. The great traditional stories that are recounted in performances embody myths; and may unfold symbols rooted in origins earlier even than Hinduism. I argue that myths provide for the most basic and universal performance competence in spectators, whether they be Hindu or not, Indian or not. Myth permeates the reception processes of popular spectators and elitist appreciators of Kathakali alike.

This thesis looks at Kathakali primarily from the perspective of the consumers of performance, exploring the dynamics of the reception processes of those who attend performances, and acknowledging that there are always individual differences in the way that spectators interact with the scenographic spaces and what is occurring in them. The creative, suggestive world of Kathakali does not function in isolation from the mundane processes of the wider culture. The performance style of natyadharmi, the highly conventionalised form established by the Natyasastra, which distinguishes culturally “marked” performances, and the style of lokadharmi, which characterises the mundane, popular, “unmarked” performances of daily life inter-relate symbiotically. Within the conventions of natyadharmi there inhere to some degree the conventions of lokadharmi. The coherence of the created performance world depends upon a body of conventions which is itself continually being developed in the wider culture. Additionally, there are other ways in which the performance world links and incorporates the mundane
world. The fictional space created by the performance is not necessarily confined to the scenographic space or to the wider performance space. Exophoric references in narratives extend the fictional space beyond the confines of the performance space and the performance can extend beyond the scenographic space to appropriate unto itself other spaces, such as that occupied by the spectators. The making of meaning in performance semiosis always involves inter-textual references, including other performances as texts, which individuals bring to their interpretations.

The intertextuality brought by individuals to performance influences their readings of conventions established by a particular performance, in its development of fictional spaces, its use of exophoric references and its extension of performance worlds to incorporate the mundane spaces of spectators. Different cultural groups will often have identifiably different aesthetics through which they view performances. In Hindu India, in relation to traditional performance genres, religion plays a highly significant role in determining the stories that will be popularly recounted in performance. It also greatly influences the aesthetics that traditionally operate. Bhakti, or worship, is consciously brought to many traditional performance genres by spectators, and not only to ritual performances. “Bhakti has no need of rites and ceremonials, for on the path of bhakti all things done and thought may be regarded as offerings to god …[It is] the way of devotion, faith and love” (Walker, vol.1, 1983:139). While bhakti has no need of ceremonies it does nevertheless make use of them. Religion and bhakti are operating alongside politics in the wider culture; and their influences are to be found across a spectrum of groups that may distinguish themselves as being either popular spectators or self-styled elitist appreciators of Kathakali. The ways in which religion and bhakti, for example, function inter-textually with performances will depend in some measure on the degree of cultural competence specific to Kathakali within those who view it.

Let me illustrate this last point from field observations and the interviews that I carried out. At the performance held in conjunction with the festival at Sri Krishna temple at Kavassery (6.12.’92), the actor playing Krishna left the
scenographic space and walked down through the segregated women’s section of the spectators’ space in order to greet his great friend, Kuchela, who was approaching from the rear of the spectators. Old women bowed their heads in prayer at the arrival of Krishna in their midst. The performance was appropriating the mundane spectator space to the unfolding narrative. The mundane became interpolated with the mythic; and, possibly, the conventions governing Kathakali became interpolated and conflated, perhaps with those of contiguous performance genres or with inter-textual references of a religious and devotional nature. Actor and character, in this instance, seem to have become fused for some devotees of Krishna. Perhaps the mythical dimensions of the performance have amplified the bridging of cognitive processes by emotional responses. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (1976:15), in *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, observes that “It is the particular talent of mythology to bridge the gap between the affective and cognitive aspects of religion – to fill the heart.”

At the same temple festival at Kavassery (6.12.’92), in her interview just prior to the performance, one woman remarked:

*We are given the power (sakti) to see and understand the divine images. As I have read the Ramayana and so on it is possible to understand it when it is seen in performance.* (Thailambal, 52, Brahmin housewife)

Thailambal appears to bring consciously to bear on the performances her inter-textual references to the epic narratives with a view to being able “to see and understand the divine images”.

At another temple festival, at Perumangod Vishnu temple, at Perangod (17.12.’92), a dance student, who had studied Kathakali for some time, when asked if there was anything in Kathakali that she disliked, replied:

*Generally there is nothing to be disliked in Kathakali. As we worship Kathakali there is nothing in it that we dislike.* (Ambili, 19, Nair, dance student)

Ambili appears to be bringing bhakti to bear and making of the performance a ceremonial occasion of devotion. Her own training in dance, specifically in Kathakali, does not appear to present impediment to her conflating performance
conventions and devotional attitude, even if Kathakali is performed adjacent to
the temple and not within it.

In contrast to these example of conflationary tendencies wrought through
inter-textual referencing of the performance by individuals, C.Balakrishnan, an
appreciator of Kathakali who is well-steeped in its conventions and whom I
interviewed at a Palakkad Kathakali Club performance in that city (Palghat -
20.12.‘92), is very clear about maintaining the distinction between actor and
character:

_I remember the performance of the great Kunjukuru, in the late nineteen thirties,
when I was seventeen or eighteen. My parents were very strict. They were great
fans of Kathakali, but they didn’t want their son to lose the distinction between
Raman Kutty Nair and his Arjuna…_(C.Balakrishnan, 69, Nair, chartered
accountant in the public service).

On the basis of the degree of performance competence that one brings to
Kathakali, one might expect the more discerning appreciators to be better able
to distinguish clearly between the specific performance conventions of
Kathakali and their own inter-textual references. On the other hand, popular
spectators who have not got a high level of performance competence might
reasonably be expected to be more susceptible to conflating inter-textual
references with Kathakali, possibly interpolating the conventions of contiguous
performance genres, conflating sacral spaces with more secular ones, merging
actors with characters and mythical spaces with the mundane.

Meaning is constructed or attributed through a system of signs which,
though at times more specifically framed by particular conventions, are
nevertheless, in a particular culture, ranged on a continuum of contexts which
incorporate the widest possible parameters of that culture. There is systemically
retained some vestige of any particular sign that is imported from one context
and read in another. It still carries elements of intertextuality when it functions
in any given context. Even in the most highly convention-bound performances,
signs necessarily carry, embedded within them, meaning which has been
developed and is still being developed within the wider culture. I refer to
performance semiotician, Marco De Marinis, who, in his discussion of the
Illustration 19:
Kirata”, Goa, 1990 – Arjuna, Third of the Pandavas; Kirata, Shiva in disguise; and Kirastri, Parvati in disguise.
hierarchical organisation of theatrical frames of reference, notes the “impossibility of clear distinctions between the spectator’s theatrical and extra-theatrical knowledge”. He goes on to indicate “the possibility that identical cognitive structures or units can simultaneously be a part of both specifically theatrical and extra-theatrical schemas” (De Marinis, in Fitzpatrick, 1989:183). Even within the elite, the more disciplined spectators who have been well acculturated to and familiarised with specific performance conventions, one can expect a degree of inter-textual referencing between theatrical and extra-theatrical knowledge within the semiosis of performances. This intertextuality includes references to mythic narratives that are possibly imbued with sacrality and may carry attendant attitudes of devotion.

**Mystification and a World of Dreams**

Intertextuality is a significant factor in the operation of myth in relation to Kathakali. The fluid boundaries that are developed strategically in performance allow for the susceptibility of spectators imaginatively to merge performance and extra-performance knowledge, to conflate the conventions of diverse performance genres, to incorporate the mythic to the mundane and vice-versa. If persons other than the spectators appropriate these same conflational processes into strategies that are designed to popularise Kathakali and ignore or obscure its conventions, either deliberately or through lack of academic rigour, then one might justifiably refer to those processes as mystification. However, one should not be too ready to apply this term to all conflational processes that are identifiable within spectators, particularly when they are due to their own inter-textual referencing and possibly their own lack of performance competence. Mystification may describe a process whereby diverse, discrete texts produced by others are merged, conflated or confounded into a collective interpretation with a view to manipulate still others.
The commercial world that has undertaken the promotion of Kathakali beyond its traditional performance spaces and outside the elitist Kathakali clubs sometimes includes in its promotional hype deliberate strategies aimed at popularising Kathakali through processes of mystification. The issuing of printed programs specifically for Kathakali performances, in a traditional, rural or village setting is not a customary practice. However they are not unknown amongst the elitist appreciators, to whom the importance of details of the highly skilled performers engaged often outweighs that of the titles of the story-plays to be performed. For international spectators and for tourists, or for those attending travelling performances within India, programs or handbills with suitably explanatory and instructive notes continue to be developed.

I refer now to one such flyer to illustrate my reference to the processes of “mystification” in Kathakali. This particular flyer for the play, *Kirata*, was aimed at non-Malayalees, both Indian nationals and foreign tourists outside of Kerala, for a performance by a travelling troupe in the nearby state of Goa in 1990. (Subsequently, in this chapter, I quote a translated section of the dramatic text for the same play, *Kirata*. I also refer to my field notes relating to a performance of the same play on a subsequent occasion in a traditional village context in Kerala.)

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The intricate make up will begin an hour before play time and you would want to watch this art of transformation.

Guests are welcome to take photographs or even to film the show without charge.
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This week’s story: Kiratam or THE DIVINE SAVAGE

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KATHAKALI - AN EPIC DANCE DRAMA

Few art forms of the world are as powerfully primitive and at the same time poetic, as KATHAKALI is. None is older. There is a magnificent savagery about this art form which is also mature in all details and most exquisitely choreographed. It shakes up both body and soul. And yet this turbulation is maintained with flawless poise and one would not wonder that it should prolong the life expectancy of the dancers.

There is no way to watch KATHAKALI and remain unmoved by it. It will make the spectators walk back to a distant past when epic gods and goddesses stomped the earth, ennobling humanity and sometimes clashing with it. The tall, timeless mountains, the hungry, roaring sea, the beasts of the forest, saintly men, sultry women, many-headed demons, they are all brought alive on the stage by the dancers.

These opening paragraphs, which blatantly appeal to the “popular” spectator, in this case, the casual observer who is not steeped in the conventions of Kathakali, resound with the tones of the fairground spruiker. There is historical inaccuracy regarding the primacy of Kathakali. There is a process of mystification which links Kathakali to the “powerfully primitive” and, at the same time to the “poetic”, to the metaphysics of “body and soul” and to the hint that “it should prolong the life expectancy of the dancers”. There is interpolation of the mythical and the mundane, the heroic and the prosaic, the divine and the human. The mythical past, performance present and metaphysical future, potentially blur the boundaries of humanity that are normally drawn by the rational processes. This is mystification. However, the influences of bhakti will bring myriad approaches to the reading of Kathakali
Illustration 20:
King Nala (Paccha make-up type) and Damyanti, his consort (Minukku make-up type) in “Nala Charitam – Day Four”, Kettaya, 1.12.91
performances and these readings will only rarely be subjected to rigorous analysis, reflectively, by those who bring them as inter-textual references to their own performance semiosis. Casual observers from outside the culture will bring into play their own intertextual references.

One casual observer who is not steeped in the conventions of Kathakali is the psychologist C.G. Jung, who has provided us (Zarrilli 1984:7) with a first hand account of his own reception of Kathakali:

Everything is bizarre, subhuman and superhuman at once. The dancers do not walk like human beings - they glide ... The world we know offers nothing even remotely comparable to this grotesque splendour. Watching these spectacles one is transported to a world of dreams, for that is the only place where we might conceivably meet anything similar.52

Here we have an attempt to describe Kathakali, under the gaze of a spectator who is not to be counted among the elitist appreciators. Jung’s description offers no specific insights to virtuoso performance or an understanding of Kathakali’s conventions. It draws on the breadth of his own life’s work to describe what appears before him. It is subjectively honest. (See Appendix Four – Myth, Psychology and Indology.) Jung’s description of Kathakali, in terms of the “bizarre, subhuman and superhuman”, is intelligible in diverse ways to a very wide readership. His description provides for me, in my inter-textual referencing, a link to Coomaraswamy’s writing on aesthetics. When discussing the traditional processes of contemplating Indian images, Coomaraswamy (1977:159-60) elaborates upon the function of anthropomorphic, theriomorphic and abstract images. The snippet of response to Kathakali from Jung and the responses given in my interviews by traditional spectators of Kathakali who make reference to bhakti, come together for me in Coomaraswamy’s work on the traditional arts in India.

Coomaraswamy (1977:159-60) clarifies the point that when “anthropomorphic” is applied to Indian images, it does not import any sense of “naturalistic”, a description which I find to be applicable to most of Kathakali’s heroic figures. Coomaraswamy points to the example of the Buddha image which “is not in any sense a portrait, but a symbol; nor indeed are there any
images of any deity that do not proclaim by their very constitution that ‘this is not the likeness of a man’.” Coomaraswamy points out that there are canonic proportions laid down for the ways that gods differ from men and that the symbolic images do not provide for a reflection of anything that has been physically seen, but they are an “intelligible form or formula”. The factor of intelligibility to which Coomaraswamy refers seems to depend upon a micro-/macrocosm relationship between the canonic, conventionalised or marked world of the art microcosm and the conventions of the unmarked, wider culture. The relationship is similar to that which I have suggested may exist between the conventions of natyadharmi and lokadhami in Indian performance. The former more marked and canonic performance world comprehends conventions from the wider culture, or otherwise would remain unintelligible. The “bizarre, subhuman and superhuman” and the “anthropomorphic” but not “natural” components of Kathakali provide for strong links between mythic narratives, performance spaces and the mundane world and those links are forged most directly within the semiosis of spectators. Let me illustrate this connection by reference to one of the respondents to my interviews:

[My favourite character is] Krishna. Maybe because I have a closer psychological relationship with Krishna – the god, not just the role.
Radha Krishnan, 28, Panikkar, soldier.
Mangod Kathakali Club, 12.12.’92

**Myths, Archetypes and Performance Competence**

*When divine events arise in the story and coincide with the current situation and sorrows in our lives, they attract us more.*
K.V.Raja Lakshmi, 66, Sudra, housewife.
Kavassery, Shri Krishna Temple, 6.12.’92
In her discussion of the “Theatre of Myth” Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty notes that the enactment of myth in performances provides for a moment in which “myths take on the ritual aspect of communal experience”. O’Flaherty (1988:121) points to the permeability of the fourth wall, the encompassing of spectator spaces within performance spaces, through the incarnating of myth and the supernatural:

Ritual, like myth, works better when it is well done. Of all literary forms drama best produces the effects of myth, most powerfully through the catharsis of the tragic drama, but also in the surreal humour of great comedy. The voices and bodies of the actors serve to bring the mythical and supernatural alive for us on an anthropomorphic level, to make them physically real. The fourth wall is notoriously permeable, and the audience feels that the group caught up in the story on the stage is a part of the world of the audience.

O’Flaherty goes on to note particularly the self-consciousness about the relationship between myth and life that is discovered in Hindu literature and here unfolded through performance. O’Flaherty (1988:122) elaborates the spectator’s dramaturgic co-involvement, bridging aesthetic experience, devotional attitude and salvation:

The use of the aesthetic experience in salvation was the subject of much discussion in classical Indian philosophy. By seeing and therefore participating in the enactment of the myth of Krishna, one was led unconsciously into the proper stance of the devotee. Moreover, the viewer was not merely inspired to decide what role in the cosmic drama he or she wished to play (mother, lover, brother, or friend of Krishna); one was inspired to discover what role one was playing, had been playing all along, without knowing it.

Here O’Flaherty has applied analysis to a traditional spectator’s devotional approach to performance in order to discern possible levels of the operation of myth. In a very different approach, Jung warns of the inapproachability of art or religion by way of psychology. When Jung expounds upon the relationship of psychology to, respectively, art and religion he draws a parallel between them.

Jung says that the question of what art is cannot be a subject for psychological study any more than the essential nature of religion can be touched upon by psychologists. “Only that aspect of art which consists in the process of artistic creation can be a subject for psychological study, but not that which constitutes its essential nature.” The “essential nature” of art, he suggests,
can only be approached from aesthetics. Similarly, “a psychological approach is permissible only in regard to the emotions and symbols which constitute the phenomenology of religion, but which do not touch upon its essential nature” (Jung, 1984:65).

Although the essence of these two phenomena remains outside the scope of psychology, Jung’s theorising does provide insight into the operation of myth, and it is useful to understanding the phenomena of religion and the reception of art. My own speculation on myth as the basic performance competence, following in this chapter, is strengthened by Jung’s work on myth, and particularly that on the development of primordial images or archetypes in relation to the collective unconscious.

Jung makes two very salient points about the moment when the mythological situation of the archetype reappears in subjects; and they both resonate for me with the experiences described by spectators of Kathakali. The first of these is that the moment “is always characterised by a peculiar emotional intensity; it is as though chords in us were struck that had never resounded before, or as though forces whose existence we never suspected were unloosed”. The second characteristic associated with the archetypal situation is that “we suddenly feel an extraordinary sense of release, as though transported, or caught up by an overwhelming power” (Jung, [1922], [1967], 1984:80-2). He goes on to suggest that at such moments the voice of all humankind resounds within us and that we are no longer individuals but the race.

There is no particular reason [for liking The Story of Nala]. However, it includes all the experiences that mankind undergoes.

Rama Krishnan Nair, 68, Nair, retired village officer. Mangod Kathakali Club, 12.12.’92

Such commonly affirmed responses to Kathakali, responses of popular spectators, seek to link what they see in performance to their every-day existence, through whatever personal intertextualities; and their responses should be incorporated into the dialogues of scholars of dramatic form, structure or cultural milieu, as an acknowledged part of spectator reception processes, that is, the dramaturgy of the spectator.
In describing the archetype phenomenon, Jung affirms that it can be a daemon, a human being or a process, but it is a figure that constantly reappears and that it “appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed”. Jung (1984:80-2) says:

When we examine these images more closely, we find that they give form to countless typical experiences of our ancestors. They are, so to speak, the psychic residua of innumerable experiences of the same type. They represent a picture of psychic life in the average, divided up and projected into the manifold figures of the mythological pantheon…. In each of these images there is a little piece of human psychology and human fate, a remnant of the joys and sorrows that have been repeated countless times in our ancestral history, and on the average follow ever the same course.

In contrast, O’Flaherty (1988:146), in regard to myth and archetype, emphasises their unique and personal qualities rather than to their having collective validity:

Both the myth and the archetype value themselves for the unique situation of each one in its own single culture; but both of them also value themselves for their ability to capture a universal truth. The unique situations form, with all the other unique situations, a flock of separate geese. Despite their similarities, they cannot be made to fly in a neat wedge formation. For the universal truth is the One Wild Goose.

The great sorrows that are shared by humankind through the performance of mythic narratives drawn from the Hindu epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, are a primary attraction for popular spectators of Kathakali (See the interviews that I report in Chapter Seven). Significantly, the most popularly nominated play, “The Story of Nala”, particularly narrates diverse sorrows that may also provide for universal human experience, at the level not only of communication but also of communion. In discussing this function of communion rather than communication in the re-telling of myths O’Flaherty (1988: 148) links the former to our past and the latter to projected futures, providing thus a mythic present in the co-witnessing of performance for the fluid processes of non-historical time:

People listen to stories not merely to learn something new (communication), but to relive, together, the stories that they already know, stories about themselves (communion). Where communication is effective, communion is evocative. Where communication seeks to influence the future, communion draws upon the past. Traditional oral story-telling techniques (as well as contemporary serials) satisfy the need for communion, rather than (or in addition to) communication; the audience takes pleasure in predicting what will happen, and satisfaction in seeing it happen, rather than being surprised or
shocked. Children, for whom we preserve the oral tradition, are often unable to tolerate the tension of surprise and shock. They demand to be reassured about the happy ending before they will allow the story to go on. When we take in new myths from other cultures, which are no longer able to surprise them but are able to surprise us, we experience both communion and communication.

In the “Story of Nala”, Nala loses his wealth and his kingdom in a beguiled game of dice, is subsequently exiled and in his abysmal misery feels constrained to abandon his faithful and dutiful wife in order to minimise her suffering. After prolonged suffering and separation there is an eventual reconciliation and restitution. This narrative, from the Mahabharata, provides through performance a common link at the mythic level for all spectators. O’Flaherty (1988:124) articulates the way in which mythic drama enables spectators to translate vicariously fantasy into reality:

The mythic drama serves vicariously as an escape valve to release intolerable tensions that are in fact a part of our lives. But it also enables its witnesses to experience at one remove a fantasy translated into reality. The mythic drama allows us to live as sages and as hunters at the same time, without conflict. The drama is more real than fantasy, because we can see it with our own eyes, and touch the flesh and blood actors; yet it is less real (and hence less costly) than reality.

Although “The Story of Nala” is cited by many elitist appreciators for the opportunities that it offers for individual virtuoso performances, they too inevitably respond to the mythic dimensions of human suffering that are recounted in the performance. The level of mythic response remains equally a part of the inter-textual references of elitist appreciators and popular spectators alike and it becomes a common factor to their diverse aesthetics. On this basis I argue that shared myths provide the basic performance competence of humankind; and they provide in performance, for those observers from outside the tradition, the material for the construction of metamyths. O’Flaherty (1988:139) affirms the possibility of spectators who are outsiders to the cultural performance nevertheless discovering therein or constructing there from their own meta-myths:

Let us pull back again from the inside of the text to the outer frame that we inhabit as readers of the text. Is it possible for us, too, to do what the heroes and heroines of these stories do, to move myth from the past to the present and the future, to take up myths from within our own culture or from within another culture? I believe that we can, that it is possible to construct (or discover) a metamyth (or a meta-metamyth) by reflecting not merely upon the classical
themes of our own tradition but upon the classical themes of other peoples’ traditions.

Isn’t it the experience of common people to marry, to abandon each other and then to meet again and to be reconciled? Hence the liking [for The Story of Nala].
Malini, 19, Menon, student.
Perangod, Perumangod Vishnu Temple, 17.12.92

Mythic Ground and Performance Strategies
in Kathakali

It is in the performance of an expression that we re-experience, re-live, re-create, re-tell, re-construct, and re-fashion our culture. The performance does not release a pre-existing meaning that lies dormant in the text (Derrida 1974; Barthes 1974). Rather the performance itself is constitutive. Meaning is always in the present, in the here-and-now, not in such past manifestations as historical origins or the author’s intentions. Nor are there silent texts, because once we attend to the text, giving voice or expression to it, it becomes a performed text, active and alive. It is what Victor Turner called “putting experience into circulation” (Bruner, 1986:11-12, [ed.s] Turner and Bruner).

The mythic ground that is laid in Kathakali by the epic and Puranic narratives and interpreted by traditional popular spectators enables the transgression of that notional boundary between historical and non-historical time, between mundane spaces and mythic ones. This process is enhanced by the rhythms of traditional music, which itself offers a dilation of time, in as much as it underpins many contiguous performance genres, including traditional ritual performances. The bizarre make-up and costuming provide an additional inter-layering of material that is conducive to flight from the cognitive to the imaginative processes within spectators.
The dramatic text, which is drawn from the mythic narratives of the Puranic epic literature, provides a strong mythic link, the story, for the story-play of Kathakali. But there are other, performance strategies that further facilitate the transgression of boundaries, among them the appropriation of spectator spaces to scenographic ones in performance. Kapferer, (1986:202, [ed.s] Turner and Bruner) notes the irreducible nature of performance-as-text, as distinct from the dramatic text:

Performance as the unity of text and enactment is realized in a variety of forms, aesthetic and otherwise, which carry with them, as a potential of their structure, their own possibilities for the realization of meaning and experience. They are not necessarily reducible one to another.

Here below, I look first at an excerpt of dramatic text for *Kirata* (Irrattakulangara Rama Varier, 1801-1845) from the translation by Pilaar (1993:58) and then at some of the performance strategies that have been applied to it.

**Scene 2:** Kirata (Siva), Kiratastree (Parvati), Bhutas (Imps53).

*Narrator:*

Himalaya’s daughter and the destroyer of death,

(An exophoric reference to the mythical abode of Parwati, consort of the god Shiva, and her Lord, the Destroyer)

Who protect their devotees and all who live rightly,

(An endophoric reference to the performance space and the spectator-devotees, linking the “there” and the “here”, the mythic and the mundane.)

Mother and father of pure Subramanya,

And the elephant-headed Ganapati,

(Mythical genealogy is provided in their off-spring, Subramanya and Ganpati. The latter is also known as Ganesh, the elephant-headed god who removes all obstacles and to whom ritual devotion is paid before the undertaking of any offerings to other gods, so that the subsequent rituals might be unfolded in
perfect forms. Reference to Ganapati/Ganesh at the opening of this scene of the play ceremonially likens the performance to familiar propitiatory rituals.)

Joyfully dressed themselves up like kattalas₅⁴

(This reference to the mythic story of Kirata (Siva) and Kirastree’s (Parvati) sojourn on earth, disguised as forest dwellers, provides also a coincidental reference to the costuming of actors/characters in the present performance space. Costuming provides the common link for interpolating references to the mythic narrative and to the devices of the actor in performance.)

And made up a plot to test Arjuna’s Strength and devotion, and reduce his pride,
Before granting the boon that their favourite desired.
The bhutas, too, put on dress
Of forest dwellers and prepared for the hunt,
The world’s four quarters shook with their raucous Shouts as they spread out a catching net,

(Further conjunction of exophoric and endophoric references and of the mythic, the performance and the mundane worlds, as the “world’s four quarters”, out there, shake in the raucously performed hunt that is performed here and now; providing for spatial and temporal conjunction of mythic and mundane realities and of the universal with the particular.)

While Siva-Kirata practised the hunter’s Call that would make the wild creatures run into it.
To spoil the efficacy of Arjuna’s prayer,
A demon (a foe of Arjuna’s father, Great Indra) in guise of a boar came there -
Sent by his wicked cousin, Duryodhana.
Into the net ran this huge demon-boar,
And broke out again with a blood-curdling roar.
Illustration 21:
Kirata, Shiva in disguise (Karutta Tadi make-up type)
Levancheri Temple, Kolancord, 7.12.'91
(The transitional processes of exchange between anthropomorphic and theriomorphic dimensions further elaborate the transformational and mercurial qualities of mythic realities; potentially, they also elaborate the fluid quality of the conceptual boundaries of these diverse realities within the semiosis of spectators.)

Siva-Kirata, his third eye smoking,
Shot at it and hit causing it pain;
It ran towards Arjuna, whom, before dying,
It meant to kill, roaring again.
Arjuna, disturbed at his prayer,
released
An arrow, and dead at his feet lay the beast.
Now with the pretext for quarrelling,
Kirata
Strode up and angrily roared at Arjuna.

At the narrative level of this highly popular dramatic text for Kathakali we find many of the transformational, metamorphic dimensions of myth. They combine anthropomorphic and theriomorphic aspects with lessons in piety and meditation, pride, anger and combat, humiliation and devotion, and eventual reconciliation and divine beneficence. I now look at some of the performance strategies that have been brought to bear on this dramatic text and see how the performance provides for further elaboration of the conjunctive dimensions of mythic and mundane realities.

In deepest night, in rural Kerala, Kathakali is played out in a space adjacent to the temple. Often this scenographic space is within that village square which also incorporates the shrine around the sacred Arl tree. There under pale stage lights produced by a portable generator carried in for the occasion, before an audience seated on the dusty square, the actors bring their own strategies to bear upon the shift from mundane to mythic spaces. The flickering flame of the traditional oil lamp marks the centre of the stage of tamped earth at its edge, providing a boundary. To one side the mundane world of the spectators sits wide-eyed in awe of the spectacle unfolding, as I have witnessed. Beyond this lamp, safely confined to the canopied stage, the mythic
ground of the performance unfolds its heroes and demons. At three in the morning some spectators lie sleeping on their mats, wrapped in their lungis as the performance vibrates on unto the first pink streaks of dawn light.

In this performance, what was notable was the use of the scenographic space opened up when Kirata, accompanied by the “imps” (ghosts), left the stage at the end of Scene Two and casually walked off to hunt, through the male section of the spectators, heading off into the dark, far end of the village square, beyond the sacred Arl tree and its shrine.

He was followed first by a couple of the more forward boys, but subsequently, like the Pied Piper of Hamlin, by a train of curious village children. Meanwhile Scene Three had opened with Arjuna engrossed in penance on stage.

Suddenly, the previously placid Kirata turned back towards the spectators and the stage, in pursuit of the great demon-boar, and with whirling, furious action, and in-human noises, accompanied by frenzied somersaulting imps, terrified the fleeing children who sought refuge among the spectators. The black-beard and his imps did not balk at the seated spectators; they whirled like dervishes, kicking up clouds of dust and forcing every single spectator in the women’s section to their feet.

Even when the dust had settled and Kirata had once more taken his place on the stage, the spectators seemed unable to resume their seats. They remained standing, huddled, pressing their bodies to one another and ready to recoil at every gesture of an implied, possible, further attack on them by Kirata. The spectators seemed utterly bewildered by a breach of their own expectations of their own staging conventions. The axis of performance at right angles to the stage seemed to have been, in this instance, a complete surprise to these spectators. The performance space of this axis was created at their reluctant but total displacement, from the rear of the spectators right up to the stage. This action took place just one hour before the end of the final scene, of this the final play for the night’s program. (Field notes, 7 December, 1991, Levancheri Temple, near Kolannkord, Palghat District)

The actors’ strategies have provided a further elaboration of the process whereby boundaries are dissolved. The staging convention that normally provides for a safe boundary between mundane and mythical spaces has been dissolved. In spatial terms, on this newly created axis, the temple space, the scenographic space and the sacred space generated by the shrine at the Arl tree extend and dilate to swallow up the spectators into the mythical ground of Kirata and whirl them physically into the action of the performers. And all of
this happens in deepest night when quite a few sleepy spectators had momentarily dozed off. Their consciousness has been strategically startled back to an awareness of the combat that is about to ensue between Arjuna and the god Shiva, in the guise of Kirata, one of their favourite scenes.

These performance strategies have provided for a manipulation of the axes of the scenographic space in order to thrust the action into the spectators’ defined mundane space, transgressing the conventional performance boundary between the mundane and the mythic. Within the internal processes of performance semiosis, reason is at best only an equal partner to imagination.

The Role of Myth and Traditional Aesthetics in the Semiosis of Kathakali

In his essay, “The Philosophy of Mediaeval and Oriental Art”, the noted art historian Coomaraswamy (1977:58) discusses the survival of traditional art and draws strong parallels between the arts of the European Middle Ages and those of the East, pointing out that they were arts of a people and not of individuals or classes. He goes on to say, firstly, that “when cultures are perverted the traditional culture only survives superstitiously over against the individualistic and supposedly more sophisticated, though really naïve, art of the bourgeoisie.” He makes the further point that “in societies based on vocation, it is taken for granted that the artist is not a special kind of man, but every man a special kind of artist.” From this line of discussion he draws the conclusion, regarding patronage of the arts that “every man as patron possesses a general knowledge which he has the right to expect in the artist whom he commissions to make a particular thing for his use.” If we apply this maxim to the contemporary patrons of Kathakali then we can identify a remnant of those more traditional expectations also at the level of religion, of religious myths and of bhakti. This factor may be more appreciably, but not exclusively, identifiable among those whom I refer to as popular spectators, rather than
among the elitist appreciators, who perhaps also bring to the performances a greater awareness of the conventions of Kathakali.

The arguments that Coomaraswamy provides for the traditional perception of arts in India depend upon the acceptance of the intellectual processes as a key component to traditional aesthetics. However, he makes the point that his ideal spectator of the arts is a holistic entity in which intellect and intuition freely interact. If we regard contemporary Kathakali spectators interacting with mythic dimensions of performance, we cannot assume that their responses are entirely imaginative, but rather that they incorporate holistically the interplay of intellect. If spectators’ semioses of mythic dimensions of performance are dependent upon imaginative processes, they are not to be presumed to be devoid of an intellectual component.

In her discussion of religion, aesthetics and the contemplative mind, Meduri (in *Asian Theatre Journal*, 5,1,1988:24-25) uses the context of Bharata’s *Natyasastra*. She stresses the attention given by Bharata to theatrical unity and aesthetic wholeness, factors that evoke “in the meditative mind a philosophic, cosmic vision of unity”. She goes on to suggest that “this might explain the theatre’s abiding popularity in Indian aesthetics and its compelling centrality in religious discourse”. Bharata’s sympathetic spectators, she suggests, are “endowed with superior artistic and intellectual capabilities” through which they “harmonise differences into unities” and, “like the performer, perceive the sublime in the erotic, the divine in the human.” Bharata’s ideal spectator here seems to correspond more closely to some of the elitist appreciators of Kathakali rather than to the popular spectators that I describe, if for “superior intellectual capabilities” one reads a “depth of understanding of the performance conventions”.

The process described here by Meduri, of “harmonising differences into unities” is not explicitly labelled as an intellectual one, but its close contextual linking with “Bharata’s sympathetic spectator” suggests an intellectual dimension. However, is not the process of “harmonising differences into unities” one that may well depend equally upon imaginative elements? In
which case the underpinning of shared mythic narratives that both popular spectators and elitist appreciators bring to performance also enables this process of “harmonising differences into unities”. It does so by bringing a conjunction of mythic and mundane realities to semiosis; and this dimension of fluidity of boundaries may function holistically across reason and imagination. The traditional aesthetics described by Coomaraswamy also relate clearly to intellectual processes, but he introduces explicitly a holistic principle that could integrate the intuitive and the rational processes. Meduri’s “harmonising of differences into unities” depends equally upon a holistic operation of reason and imagination. Coomaraswamy (1977:168) notes the possible simultaneity of cognition and intuitive experience:

The aesthetic experience empathetically realised and cognitive experience intuitively realised can be logically distinguished, but are simultaneous in the whole or holy man who does not merely feel but also understands

The orthodox characteristics that the Natyasastra required of ideal spectators are itemised by Richmond, in a discussion of Sanskrit theatre. Richmond (in Richmond et al, 1990:47) summarises the requirements as follows:

They should be of good character, high birth, quiet and learned, partial, advanced in age, alert, honest and virtuous. The audience was to be proficient in drama and acting, expert in playing musical instruments, knowledgeable about costumes and make-up and expert in other branches of the arts and crafts. They should understand the meaning of the sciences (sastra). Grammar, prosody, sentiment and emotion - all these were to be known and appreciated by the ideal spectator.

In the application of these ideal spectator prerequisites to Kathakali, the fluidity of mythic dimensions of narrative and the conjunction of mythic scenographic spaces and mundane ones, may allow for the holistic integration of imaginative and rational processes. Grammar, prosody, sentiment and emotion may be engaged by both reason and imagination in holistic interplay. Bharata made clear reference to the inclusive nature of performance and that it should reach all, or at least all of the four castes, to include the Sudra. The instruction of all, which seems to be at the root of this proposal, cannot be achieved through performance without recourse to both the imaginative processes as well as the rational ones in performance reception. The Natyasastra does, after all, “speak of those who attend the theatre as spectators,
literally ‘those who see’” (Richmond, in Richmond et al, 1990:46). The spectacular, popular elements of performance cannot be divorced from those of more intellectual appeal. One must recognise the integration of the rational and the imaginative also within the performance semiosis of mythic dimensions. The notion of the intellect without the imagination may be momentarily entertained as an academic exercise, but it has little scope for survival in the imaginative world of performance, nor in the balanced internal processes of humankind.

The incapacity of spectators to articulate their own experiences in purely rational terms may provide a link to the balanced view of reason and imagination that I am here promulgating. In some of the interview responses I find support also for Bruner’s (1986:6-7) assertion that “(s)ome experiences are inchoate, in that we simply do not understand what we are experiencing, either because the experiences are not storyable, or because we lack the performative and narrative resources, or because the vocabulary is lacking”.

[What] fascinates me I am not in a position to answer. Because different characters have different sufferings; even a character that is happy at times has sufferings in them, don’t they? So when we see all this we begin to feel that we are one of them. A feeling that it relates to our family or something connected to it. I don’t know exactly what it is.  
Syamala Sundaram, 42, Nair, housewife.  
Perangod, Perumangod Vishnu Temple, 17.12.’92

On the other hand, the mythic dimensions of narrative elaborated in performance and imaginatively processed can be quite rationally articulated.

Arjuna is the greatest warrior. His guru, Dronacharya, said that in any war he alone would do. He is powerful enough to destroy the entire Kuru clan. And Shri Krishna helps him out. ‘Parthasaradhi’ (Krishna as charioteer to Arjuna) is a concept that incorporates both. I love and respect them both.  
K.V.Raja Lakshmi, 66, Sudra, housewife.  
Kavassery, Shri Krishna Temple, 6.12.92.
The inter-textual referencing of bhakti applied to Kathakali performances may be clearly emotional in some instances, but there is also a dimension of rationality in the articulation of the semiosis of these mythic dimensions.

*The role of Shri Krishna is always good. Then, Shri Krishna is always the hero.*
Gopinath, 23, Verma (Kshatriya), school teacher. Kavassery, Sri Krishna Temple, 6.12.'92

The distinction between contemporary usage of the term “aesthetics” and what he regards as the notion of aesthetics in traditional contexts is a significant one in Coomaraswamy’s reckoning. Coomaraswamy (1977:68-69) takes issue with what he identifies as the current use of the word “aesthetic” to denote sensational pleasures to the exclusion of intellectual interpretations. He says that “the traditional philosophy could not … possibly have understood by the ‘good’ of art a mere pleasure of the senses, such as the word ‘aesthetic’ implies, and so could not have thought of ‘beauty’ as the final end and use of art.” In his paralleling of Eastern art with Mediaeval Christian art, he alludes to St. Augustine, in Thomas Aquinas (*Sum.Theol.*II-II.167.2) and the dictum that “pleasure perfects the operation”. He links it to the Hindu precept that “a Brahmin should do nothing merely for the sake of enjoyment” (Coomaraswamy, 1977:69). He immediately ranges further, over Plato, speaking of the “summoning power of beauty”, and also the Buddhist notion that “it is for the sake of attracting man that the picture is painted in colours”(*Lankavatara Sutra* II.112-114). In all of these references to mediaeval Christian and Eastern aesthetics, Coomaraswamy is quite clear that “an attraction or a summons is to something and not to itself”. His view of traditional aesthetics includes the metaphysical dimension as the ultimate goal of attraction; I regard the contemporary dimension of bhakti in performance semiosis of Kathakali as a remnant link with his version of traditional aesthetics.

In Kathakali, the popular spectator may well be ignorant of the prescribed traits for ideal participation in performance as predicated by the *Natyasastra*. They may very well not be consciously adopting the orthodox conventions adopted by elitist appreciators for assessment of virtuoso performance. They
may not be informed of the finesses of delivery of narrative by gesture, through
mudra, and also be unfamiliar with Sanskrit, which is adopted in the brief
introductory slokas. They may not be comfortable with the often heavily
Sanskritised Malayalam that is adopted for the sung narratives. Nevertheless a
very fertile ground for the interpretation of the imagery of the performance is
laid down by other more accessible performance determinants. In my
experience, the quite fantastic make-up and costuming and the other-worldly
gait and dance patterns of the actors, the rhythms of the sung narratives and the
percussive punctuation that accompanies the actors are all conducive to
imaginative connections. There are the heroic, demonic and larger than life
characters that are drawn from the epic stories of the Mahabharata and the
Ramayana. There is the abundance of theriomorphic, grotesque and geometric
elements of make-up and costuming; and the embodied emotional states that
are richly reflected in the highly controlled eye-movements, facial distortions
and rhythms of the actors. It seems to me that all of these contribute to seduce
both the local popular spectator and the naïve foreigner to enthralled
observation of the performance. Like the colouring of a Buddhist painting, in
Coomaraswamy’s reference, they attract us. If we are spectators without
grounding in the appreciator’s disciplines, the conventions of Kathakali, then
these non-verbal performance codes draw more heavily upon our imaginative
processes. Fluid boundaries, however, continue to operate across both
imagination and reason.

When Coomaraswamy talks about the non-historical and ideal nature of
images in traditional perceptions of Indian art, he is relating his discussion also
to the truths inherent to myth. He points out that “it is of no importance from
the present point of view that the legends of the first images cannot be
interpreted as records of historical fact: what is important for us is that the
authentication of images themselves is not historical but ideal”
(Coomaraswamy, 1977:163). The ideal specifications for such images may at
times be laid down canonically, but it seems that their origins remain mythic.
He makes the point that naturalistic development of images “had never taken
place in India until the idea of representation was borrowed from Europe in the
seventeenth century”. He goes on to point out that the making of divine images
is extolled, but portraiture condemned, in the *Sukranitisara*. He cites this fact as illustration of “how the Indian consciousness has been aware of what has been called ‘the ignominy implicit in representational art’ - an ignominy closely related to that of an obsession with the historical point of view, to which in India the mythical has always been preferred” (Coomaraswamy, 1997:160-61).

Coomaraswamy frequently draws close parallels between the conception of art by mediaeval Christian philosophers and those of traditional Indian cultures, whether Hindu or Buddhist. Particular reference is made to the German mystic philosopher Meister Eckhart. I think it significant to note that Eckhart’s writing was characterised by an underpinning of neoplatonic thinking and reflected the contrast between popular religious and moral needs and the feudal tradition of the church hierarchy. Coomaraswamy in his essay “Meister Eckhart’s View of Art”(1974a) further articulates the multivalence of symbolism in art. He makes the point that art is first and foremost conventional and is not to be interpreted “as a direct reflection of the world as the world is in itself”. It should be understood as a “symbol or group of symbols having an ascertained rational significance and an even deeper content, not functioning only as a means to recognition but as means to communication and to vision.” In relation to the interpretation of scripture and myth, then, as with any other kind of art, “all the stories taken from them have another esoteric meaning (1974a: 84).” He concludes summarily with the observation that “art is simultaneously denotation, connotation, and suggestion; statement, implication, and content; literal, allegorical, and anagogic” (Coomaraswamy, 1974[a]: 84). I would add that the mythic dimensions of performance provide a particularly fertile ground for the dissolution of their boundaries with mundane realities; and for the interplay in spectator semiosis of all of the dynamics listed here by Coomaraswamy.
Conclusions

The conflational processes, which may occur when inter-textual referencing is brought to bear on the semiosis of Kathakali, may well be facilitated when mythic narratives provide the dramatic texts for performance. When mythic dimensions are opened up by dramatic texts and are simultaneously enhanced through their performance they are engaged holistically, across reason and imagination, in spectator semiosis. It is the holistic nature of this process, particularly when it is applied through a bhakti framing of performance (See also Chapter Nine), that may establish links between the contemporary semiosis of Kathakali and the perception of traditional aesthetics that is outlined by Coomaraswamy. This is probably more identifiable among the popular spectators who are less familiar with the specific conventions of Kathakali, but not exclusively so.

I argue that shared myths provide the basic competence for performance spectators and also that these myths permeate the consciousness of elitist appreciators and popular spectators alike. It is the holistic operation that allows for the touch of reason to the imaginative processes and vice versa. It is a greater fluidity of boundaries between mythic and mundane spaces that is established by the performance of myths; this fluidity readily enables the shifts between mythic and mundane realities across both rational and imaginative processes. It is common in some degree to all who view Kathakali.
Chapter Seven: Respondents’ Orientation on Stories and Their Characters

It didn’t matter that the story had begun, because Kathakali discovered long ago that the secret of the Great Stories is that they have no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don’t deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don’t surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover’s skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don’t. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won’t. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn’t. And yet you want to know again.

Arundhati Roy, 1997:229

Introduction

One of my main concerns is with learning through performance, particularly the ways in which spectators of Kathakali can learn further competencies that enhance their appreciation of performance and the ways in which these processes of learning may be derived from and promoted by the performances themselves. In this context, I adopt the terms “spectator” and “appreciator” to distinguish between the more popular spectators and the more elitist, aficionados of Kathakali. Respondents in my interviews, in order to identify themselves with the more elitist group, often use the latter of these terms.

Roy’s reference in the above quotation to the familiarity of the great stories, which are re-told in Kathakali, touches upon an element that is essential to the learning processes opened up to popular spectators. There seems to be a quality of “spell-boundness” that is associated with the great, familiar stories and it provides one of the dimensions that characterises the seduction of spectators. It helps keep them attracted to the unfolding spectacle and its
narrative and this, I argue, is the beginning of a process of learning that incorporates attention to narrative details, but also the embedded ethical, moral and political values and the fostering of greater performance competence. The dimension of spell-boundness, the willing surrender to the re-telling of the familiar “Great Stories”, provides strength of appeal to popular spectators and in combination with the spectacular dimensions of the performance attracts them to prolonged attention.

The traditional stories recounted in Hindu society through the spectrum of performance genres provide for strong cultural links across religious and secular life, across social and familial organisation, and across the different contiguous performance genres themselves. The religious and the secular have become tightly fused in the moral and ethical teachings that are imparted by the stories and by the social structure of Hindu castes, which are themselves permeated by religiously affirmed authority and obligation. It is often not very useful to draw a distinction between religious and secular life (See Chapter Nine). However, there have been recent, calculated developments towards more secular themes of stories for Kathakali and occasional adaptations of the classics from non-Hindu cultures as the basis for Kathakali performances (See Chapter Eight). The notional continuum that can be drawn between the religious and the secular will therefore be revisited at times in my thesis.

The traditional stories for Kathakali are drawn primarily from the Hindu epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (Bolland, 1980; Zarrilli, 1984). The tales drawn from these texts are, from earliest childhood heard by Hindus, recounted in temple communities and in family contexts. They are seen to be performed through dance and drama and by story-tellers, inside the temples, in village squares and in the homes of higher caste Hindus; and nowadays in auditoria and through the electronic media. These stories are represented in the iconography of temples and domestic, household prayer rooms and their scenes and characters adorn the commercially released, ubiquitous calendars that may hang in offices, barber shops, and living rooms. The stories also provide for a wide range of scholastically pursued texts. Their re-telling, in diverse contexts and in various performance genres, often characterises religious festivals, major calendric and
communal events, rites of passage and familial milestones. These stories are inseparable from all dimensions of Hindu life (Katz, 1990:2-3). Their re-telling is seemingly timeless (Matilal, 1989:3-5). Katz makes reference to the theorising of Levi-Strauss and underscores the way in which the endless re-telling and re-elaborating of essential messages imbues the *Mahabharata* with a mythic quality. Katz (1990:14) elaborates the relationship between epic and mythic corpus:

> The epic grows as it is recited again and again, but its basic message remains intact: Arjuna is the great hero. Finally, the epic becomes a complete mythic corpus in the Lévi-Straussian sense: an effort (partly unconscious) to convey a chosen message in as convincing a manner as possible, by means of repetition, permutation, transformation, and multivalent symbols.

The various performance determinants of song, dance, mudra, acting and percussion embodied in Kathakali all enhance, embellish and illuminate understanding of these stories in different ways for different spectators at different venues. Respondents often prioritise one performance determinant over others as being more significant to the individual. Social groups can often be largely identified by the live performance venues that they attend, across a spectrum that includes traditional rural, temple festivals, provincial Kathakali clubs, urban auditoria, and the premises of industrial and household sponsors. The choice of venue sometimes consciously sets different agendas for the respective groups, promoting one body of aesthetics over another, foregrounding one performance determinant over another, often seeking to draw distinctions between the popular, spectator and the elitist appreciator groups. For example, elitist appreciators may focus on an actor’s expertise and subtlety rather than on the action unfolded in the theme of the narrative or the sentiments embedded therein. Some respondents prioritise the music, some the mudra, as the dominant performance determinant. Some respondents make reference to the contribution of Sanskrit to their appreciation. Some Kathakali clubs for appreciators set their particular agenda by providing, in the wings, a simultaneous translator of mudra into the vernacular, Malayalam, for the benefit of those closely following the performance. It is theatre of the word that is drawn in mudra; the subtleties of expression in mudra, a more hermetic performance determinant, provide for contrast and counterpoint to the narrative.
details of the familiar stories, which are also rendered in sung Malayalam. Other spectators come to temple performances with some knowledge of a traditional story and a taste for spectacle and little else, in terms of performance competencies. These diverse perspectives are borne out by respondents in the interviews that follow in this chapter.

While these different performance determinants are clearly identifiable as being co-present and inter-layered in Kathakali, there are for many respondents more sublime moments when they are able to pursue their particular aesthetics to intense moments of performance, which I interpret as being characterised by co-penetration of the performance determinants. I associate this co-penetration with moments of conjunction, high-points of performance, in which the various determinants of song, mudra, dance patterns and percussive rhythms, and so on, reach beyond their discrete boundaries within the performance. Such moments, I suggest, over-reach the sum of the component determinants and open up a dimension of co-penetration in which individuals may find great joy and release. Attempts by respondents to describe these moments are often characterised by their own sense of being unable to articulate the moment.

More naïve spectators who come to the performances, such as foreign initiates, may sit utterly enthralled for an entire night at a performance for which they have had no specific preparation. They may be connecting to mythic truths that they tap into within the sheer spectacle and the energies of the performances. Even within this broad context of spectacle, the spectators will normally develop an awareness of specific determinants of performance, a consciousness of the contribution of music, dance, song, mudra and the energies that they convey, or which conveys them. There remains the possibility that greater enjoyment of spectacle by local, naïve spectators may be argued, in terms of specific cultural insights that they bring to the performance from their more general appreciation of iconography, contiguous performance genres, temple and familial contexts and so on. However, such an enhancement may not necessarily follow.

What cuts across all of these distinctions and provides for a commonality to understanding, enjoying or appreciating the performances are the stories. It is a
knowledge of the stories that provides further learning contexts for the spectators, in three areas within Kathakali performance: firstly, learning the narrative detail in greater depth as the stories are re-elaborated through performance; secondly, learning the morals, ethics and politics that are re-affirmed through their re-telling; thirdly and very importantly, learning to acquire better performance competencies across the various co-present determinants of performance. This third learning factor generated across the diverse performance determinants of Kathakali ultimately bridges the continuum between elitist and popular spectators.

In this chapter I explore the discourses of respondents who were interviewed at various venues in order to get their perspectives on the importance of the stories, or of particular characters or character-types from the stories. Against the context of the stories, and drawing on the comments of these respondents, I seek to illuminate my hypothesis, stated earlier, that with knowledge of the stories, and the will to watch and listen attentively, it is possible for popular Kathakali spectators to educate themselves towards becoming appreciators. Within these processes of interviewing and extrapolating, the participants have provided interesting and sometimes contradictory insights into the way that they themselves perceive different spectator groups at different venues. They draw distinctions between who might be viewed as popular and who as elitist spectators, and how they position themselves in relation to those groups.

The questions that were put to respondents at performance venues were aimed at establishing the motivation for their presence at the venues and the degree to which they might be accidental or casual spectators or dedicated aficionados. I have sought also to determine the developmental factors that may have contributed to their interest in Kathakali and to the shifts in interest or enthusiasm that the respondents might themselves identify as significant, that is, possible milestones in their progression from spectator to appreciator. I have tried in the interviews to get respondents to comment on the development of their own learning about Kathakali. Because I see knowledge of the stories as being an important common ground for developing further performance competencies in Kathakali, I have asked respondents about their earliest memories of Kathakali and their favourite stories and characters. I have provided the respondents with opportunities to enlarge upon the cultural factors that they
themselves consider to be of importance to understanding and appreciating Kathakali. In so doing, I am opening up the possibility for respondents to provide insights to Kathakali as a more popular performance, wide in its appeal.

So what are the preferred stories and the favourite characters? And why are they so? This chapter explores these questions. The questions that I have put to interviewees carry their own limitations. However, I want to introduce Bourdieu’s point on the limitations of the “connoisseurs” in expressing the principles of their own judgements. Bourdieu makes this point in his “Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste” when he discusses the slow and unconscious process of familiarisation in developing the competence of the connoisseur. Bourdieu (1984:66) says:

And just as the apprentice or disciple can unconsciously acquire the rules of the art, including those that are not consciously known to the master himself, by means of self-abandonment, excluding analysis and selection of the elements of exemplary conduct, so too the art-lover, in a sense surrendering himself to the work, can internalise its principles of construction, without these ever being brought to his consciousness and formulated or formulable as such; and this is what makes all the difference between the theory of art and the experience of the connoisseur, who is generally incapable of stating the principles of his judgement.

I take Bourdieu’s “principles of construction” to be a reference to the underlying structures, such as, in Kathakali the cyclical patterns inscribed by dance and the rhythms of percussion and the repetitions of sung narrative that are designed to comprehend the parallel translation in mudra. These are some of the less obvious dimensions that establish rhythmic and cyclical patterns to the structure of Kathakali (Zarrilli, 1984: 217ff). I find affirmation of Bourdieu’s reference to the incapability of the connoisseur to state principles of judgement in the example of one respondent, T.S.Madhavan Kutty, who coins the neologism “Kathakalic” to reach further in his attempt to articulate his responses to performances (See full interview following).
Spectator Discourses - Stories and Characters.

Kathakali performances provide an opportunity for people to express their likes and dislikes towards gods and heroic characters; and they also, in their representation of stories, provide reinforcement to those choices, fostering the popularity of a particular god or hero. The information expressed by respondents regarding preferences for stories and characters is summarised statistically in Appendix Three. However the most frequently nominated character, Krishna is the quintessential boundary figure, even from his birth at midnight. He is the trickster figure, the boyish prankster, the heroic warrior and destroyer of demons, the god Vishnu incarnate, the ideal consort of his favourite Radha, the erotic figure of worship who was supposed to have had 16,108 wives and lovers and 180,008 sons. He charmed maidens with his flute playing and humbled Brahmins by maddening their wives with love for him. (Walker, 1983:559ff.) In terms of the boundary condition that I have set amongst my defining characteristics of popular theatre, Krishna provides the popular hero par excellence. He can shift mercurially through a vast spectrum of roles, satisfying the thirst for adventure, the erotic and the devotional, the playful and the numinous.

The importance of the stories to particular spectators and the necessity or usefulness of a prior understanding of them is drawn differently by different respondents. At times, this divergence of opinion is characterised by elitist perspectives on the notions of what constitutes the ideal spectator, or what Iyyamkode Sreedharan, a strong advocate for more secular themes for Kathakali plays, refers to as the fundamentalist perspective. He characterises this fundamentalism by dogmatic assertions on what themes are proper or not for Kathakali performances. Respectively, the appreciator and the fundamentalist perspectives on elitism are fraught with aesthetic and political positioning, some aspects of which are presented in the latter part of this chapter (See also Chapter Eight). At times the respondents’ discourses on the stories range from bhakti (devotional) concerns, to the universality of human experiences, to the ingrained familiarity of the stories that recount those experiences and to the mythic nature
of the stories. Some allude specifically to the learning experiences that are undertaken when familiar stories are rendered in complexly multi-layered performance determinants.

**On Cutting One’s Teeth on Kathakali:** Sabarinath, a ten-year-old student and a member of the Kshatriya caste was interviewed at the Sri Krishna temple at Kavassery (6.12.’92). In response to the question, designed to elicit from him the factors accounting for his presence there, in anticipation of the Kathakali performances, he replied:

*Some children are required (in acting roles) for “Kuchela Vritta”. I am waiting for that.*

He had been watching Kathakali for about two years.

*I like it very much...If there is any festival near my father’s house and if I feel like seeing it I will go...And if there is Kathakali anywhere nearby I will go.*

His favourite play?

*“Sampoorna Ramayana” (a composite play of highlights from the Ramayana) because I can see everything from “Ramayana”.*

Favourite character?

*Hanuman (valorous and wise monkey chief) because he has a hairy costume.*

He is aware that the program for that particular evening is *Kuchela Vritta* and *Raja Suya*; and regards this prior information as being important:

*Otherwise you won’t understand the story.*

Regarding attendance for the full night’s program:

*I have to see it for sure because it is “Kuchela Vritta”.*

He did not know about the ability of all spectators to have “equal access to the performance of Kathakali”. The rather vague and perhaps clumsy phrasing of my question in terms of “equality of access to the performance determinants of Kathakali” is an attempt not only to avoid presenting a loaded question, but to provide the interviewees with the widest possible range of contexts for their interpretation of the question. I am seeking to engage the spectator’s personal views on elitist versus popular expectations, particularly on the issues raised by “performance competencies” and the learning processes which I hypothesise,
across various performance determinants and against the common ground of knowledge of the stories.

Sabarinath acknowledged that there were elements of the performance that he could not appreciate, but he did not know which, and didn’t feel that this was a matter of particular importance.

Sabarinath’s responses reveal his inability to discern what might arguably be the more highly developed performance competencies for a spectator. However, he is aware of the pleasures that he derives from Kathakali and the fullness of those experiences in terms of his own capacities. Those capacities are closely linked to his understanding and recognising the details of the stories that are to be recounted through the performance; and therefore his enjoyment of them is closely related to his having some foreknowledge of what the program is to be. At the age of ten and with the standing of two years as a spectator, he cannot be regarded, in elitist terms, as an appreciator. His responses include references to being able to appreciate the stories and to a character that is marked by spectacular elements. His earliest memory of a Kathakali performance, from two years before, recounted the Ramayana: the character Hanuman, the monkey god who appears in that story in his white, furry costume, his complicated red, black and white make-up (Vella Tadi: White Beard) and wide-brimmed helmet-style head dress, remains Sabarinath’s favourite character. My observations on the importance of sheer spectacle as a possible starting point for the gradual acquisition of further spectator competencies can legitimately be drawn from the reference to Hanuman. Sabarinath’s enthusiasm for Kathakali is directly dependent upon his life-long relationship with the traditional epics, upon his knowledge of their stories, of their characters. Story and spectacle provide for this young spectator the initial attractions that have fired his enthusiasm for a greater participation and a greater understanding of Kathakali performance.

On Learning by Attending to the Story: Kumar, a twenty-three year old commercial artist of the Parayan (Harijan) caste was interviewed at Kavassery, 6.12.’92. He identifies his special attraction to Kathakali:
The old stories are presented again by the characters (note well) as they were...One can understand from them. The Puranic stories are presented before us as if we were watching the events themselves.

I note that Kumar’s comments identify not the actors, but the characters as those who re-present the familiar stories: “The old stories are presented again by the characters as they were…” This comment, I suggest, takes his observations as spectator closer to the seemingly timeless re-telling of the stories. This reference to characters rather than actors doing the re-telling blurs the boundary between the mundane reality of the actors and the mythic reality of the Puranic narratives being enacted. The timeless quality of the enactment seems important to him: “…as if we were watching the events themselves.” This appears to be a very willing suspension of disbelief in order to participate in a more mythic time and its timeless events.

Favourite story?

Nothing in particular. I appreciate any story.

Kumar clearly regards the narrative level of performance and the re-telling of the epics and the Puranic stories as a basic competence for access to Kathakali performances.

When put the question regarding “equality of access by all spectators of Kathakali performance”, his reply suggests that the performance process itself provides for learning situations, not only at the narrative level but also in the developing of further performance competencies within a spectator.

Equality of Access?

Not possible. If one can find time to spend on understanding the action, it is possible to understand. If people don’t pay attention to Kathakali when it is going on, they can’t understand it...I can understand everything in it.

Kumar’s own confident understanding of the performance determinants that are co-present in Kathakali is clearly attributed to the simple competencies of being attentive, watching and listening, with the underpinning of knowledge of the stories.

These factors account for the beginning of a learning process that can ultimately provide an interested spectator with a level of performance competence that bridges the gap between popular spectators and self-styled, elitist appreciators. Kathakali provides its own means to self-instruction: through the familiar stories, which are
recounted in enactment that embodies two determinants of the word. Sung Malayalam and mudra provide a parallel translation for the interested observer’s self-instruction.

**On the Problems of the Generation:** Narayana Menon was a fifty-four year old retired serviceman of the Menon (Higher Nair) caste, interviewed at Kavassery (6.12.’92). He said he had been watching Kathakali for “about three or four years”, which he subsequently revised down to “one or two years”.

**Earliest recalled memory of Kathakali?**

*I don’t remember anything much. It was some time ago. It is only one or two years. I was out of Kerala. I was quite young when I first saw Kathakali. I don’t remember anything of it.*

**Special attraction?**

*Knowledge about the old art form can be gained.*

**Staying on all night?**

*Yes. I intend to see it all. I have come from a distance, happy to see whatever is on.*

**Equality of access to performance for all spectators?**

*No. Today’s generation does not like Kathakali because they will not understand its story. The hand gestures will be too difficult for them to understand. Those who are in touch with the story, especially and only Hindus - because it is taken from Hindu Purana - can understand Kathakali.*

Narayana’s references to the lack of access by the younger generation seem unjustified in the light of the interview given by his ten-year-old fellow spectator, Sabarinath. Narayana’s assumption about inaccessibility for youth is linked to his assertion that the only spectator competence required for intellectual access to Kathakali performance is a detailed knowledge of the stories. The level of narrative knowledge that is required, in Narayana’s opinion, is not available to anyone who has not grown up within Hindu culture. However, on the basis of that knowledge, he brings, as a spectator to Kathakali, an explicit expectation of further learning about its co-present performance determinants: “Knowledge about the old art form can be gained.” The Puranas, it should be noted, although originally in Sanskrit, are nowadays part of cultural knowledge that permeates everyday life and is conveyed by television, video recordings and comic books.
It seems to me that his generalisation about youth reflects a concern for the current generation not observing Hindu traditions in a manner identical to his own generation. His remarks on youth, nevertheless, focus again on knowledge of the stories. In people’s understanding this knowledge remains a prime factor for access to Kathakali performance. On this basis alone, the learning processes enabled by the performance itself will help spectators to overcome those complexities of narration which arise within the performance determinant of mudra, the elaborate hand gestures of the actor that spell out their own grammar and syntax. He goes on to affirm his own complete understanding:

Lacking in appreciation at any level?

I can understand it all. The mudras and all...I sometimes watch it on T.V.

Level of appreciation improving?\(^62\)

Yes. As I often watch it on T.V.  I have enthusiasm.

Favourite play?

“Rugmini Swayamvaram”.

Particular reason?

Nothing in particular. Because I know the stories relating to it.

Favourite character?

No. I like all of them equally.

This respondent affirms that if one understands the story, then one can understand the mudras (gestures).

Clearly, then, the benefit of the electronic media for instruction in performance determinants, particularly mudra, is available for all who care to tune in, not least of all the youth. In this context, too, knowledge of the stories and an enjoyment of spectacle will continue to provide a primary attraction to spectatorship, to watching and listening attentively.

**On Understanding the Gestures:** Velayudhan, a fifty-eight year old balloon seller who is a member of the Ezhava caste (6.12.’92, Kavassery) shares, in some measure, Narayana’s views on youth and Kathakali:

I am a balloon merchant. When I go about selling at festivals I see some of whatever program happens to be on. However, I don’t remember what it was or when it was...I don’t search it out. As I go to every program I don’t need to search it out. I am available at whatever festivals, whether it is Kathakali or anything else... I go there on business.
Old people and those who know the stories have an interest in Kathakali. Young people don’t like Kathakali, as they don’t understand it. But there are many people who come from different places bringing their own food in order to see Kathakali... When it is Kathakali only the people who know can understand it. If you show gestures with hands, legs and neck, no one can understand - especially the young people. At the same time there are people who can understand what it means to gesture in this with the hands and the neck. There are people who, if Kathakali is being performed, will take the trouble to get there...

Favourite play?

Old people like any of the stories that are divine. I like any story from Puranas

Why?

Don’t only those people who know know? Can anyone else who doesn’t know the “Ramayana” answer any question on it? He who knows the “Ramayana” can understand the gestures with hands, legs and eyes.

Favourite character?

I like all of the characters in Kathakali. If the story, the author and the acting are all right, everything is clear. Today’s story is “Kuchela Vritta”. I am waiting, taking trouble to see it.

Staying for the full night’s program?

Yes. Whatever the story might be. I like stories very much; whether it is “Ramayana”, Bhima’s story or any other story. I like stories very much.

Any dislikes?

None at all. One beats the drum, one sings and the one with the costume shows gestures with hands, legs and eyes. He who knows Kathakali can understand all of the gestures.

This last observation by Velayudhan relates to my point of the importance to the learning process of the co-presence of the various performance determinants within Kathakali. The complex interchanges and inter-penetration of the different determinants of enactment and narration call for performance competencies that are specific to Kathakali, but they also foster competence within the attentive observer. Velayudhan’s use here of the term “Kathakali” itself seems to give weight to the derivation of the word and its narrative component, *katha* (story), in the compound *Kathakali*, literally, “story-play” (Zarrilli, 1984:3). The respondent likes the story. The narrative unfolding
provides him with understanding of Kathakali performance and offers the possibility of greater competence.

**On Understanding Divine Images:** Thailambal, (Kavassery, 6.12.’92) a fifty-two year old Brahmin house-wife makes an interesting connection between a spectator’s ability to see and understand divine images and the linking of these factors to a knowledge of the stories and the learning aspects enabled by the performance process:

*We are given the power (sakti) to see and understand the divine images. As I have read the Ramayana and so on it is possible to understand it when it is in performance.*

It seems that Thailambal’s emphasis on an understanding of the stories as the key to enjoying Kathakali is not simply linked to further or deeper knowledge of the co-present performance determinants. She seems to go beyond them to a metaphysical dimension that she derives from the performance, to being “given the power to see and understand the divine images.” Coomaraswamy (1977:146) in drawing the relationship between traditional oriental aesthetics and religious iconography reminds us:

*The man who still worships the Buddhist image in its shrine has in many respects a better understanding of Buddhist art than the man who looks at the same image in a museum, as an object of fine art.*

Here, Thailambal does not explicitly pronounce upon *puja* (ceremonial worship) as the driving force to her performance participation but, from her remarks, the imaging of the divinities in Kathakali seem to provide a strong devotional aspect to her interest. I consider that the learning processes that are enabled by an understanding of the stories and by the co-present, and sometimes co-penetrating, determinants of performance surely enhance Thailambal’s empowerment to seeing and understanding divine images within the performance of Kathakali stories. She directly refers to the connection between story and play and the understanding that she derives therein.

**On Knowing the Texts:** K.V. Raja Lakshmi, the sixty-six year old housewife of the Sudra caste, when asked about the “equality of access to all to Kathakali performance”, replied as follows:
There are some who sleep. But the educated ones like us who have read Sanskrit...the “Ramayana”, the “Mahabharata”, the “Uttara Ramayana” are very much interested in Kathakali. Otherwise would these old people come to see Kathakali? No. It is the interest in it from reading the books, the stories (of Kathakali) are the same as those from devotional literature. We know the songs and acting corresponding to it. We know who the characters are, what the scenes are and what they are singing.

Raja Lakshmi’s response certainly highlights the point that essential access to Kathakali is based on knowledge of the texts. Her remarks, however, ignore the strength of oral tradition in local communities and of the plethora of other performance traditions that further elaborate the endless re-telling of those same stories. Raja Lakshmi’s remarks seem to spring from a consciousness that recognises the high level of literacy in Kerala (almost 100% in the current generation, in great contrast to the other states of India). This literacy factor is clearly of importance in acquiring an understanding of the traditional epics and Puranic literature. However, she adds a further sophistication to that learning process, by reference to her own level of literacy, not only in the reading of the traditional literature, but also in being able to read it in Sanskrit. Clearly, this remark translates to an enhanced appreciation of those same stories in Kathakali performance, in which there are adopted brief introductory slokas (verses) in Sanskrit. These slokas then become elaborated through the sung narrative in the vernacular, Malayalam, which is itself interlaid with many Sanskritised notions. Given her membership to the low caste Sudra group, and her gender, Raja Lakshmi’s remarks here also underscore the very positive impact of universal education on reducing the social, economic and political distinctions between castes and between genders in Kerala. The contribution of oral traditions and performance traditions to the elaboration of traditional stories in their re-telling is nowadays further enhanced and promulgated by the learning processes afforded by televised performance. Translational aspects of the performance and co-penetrating relations between various co-present determinants provide the ground for further learning about performance competencies.

On What is “Fitting” to Kathakali: Kumar, a forty-year-old timber merchant who belongs to the Nair caste was at the same performance space.
Kumar has earliest memories of Kathakali performances dating back to the age of twenty-five. He raised, in his interview, the question of what is “appropriate” to performance in Kathakali:

_I like stories from “Mahabharata” most because it is very fitting[^6] to Kathakali._

Favourite Characters?

_Duryodhana and Sri Krishna - I don’t like Arjuna very much - because they act well. They are real (flesh and blood) characters. Like the saying, “The innocent are condemned”, and hence my attraction towards them._

Kumar emphasises here that his preference for stories and characters is based on their capacity to provide ground for his identifying them with “real (flesh and blood) characters”. I note again, that within his remarks it is not the players who “act well” but the characters themselves. Kumar says that it is the narrative details of the well-known stories that spring to life in performance re-enactment and enable him to identify the actions of the characters with his own reality.

_C. Balakrishnan,_ sixty-nine year old chartered accountant interviewed at the performance space under the auspices of the Palakkad (Palghat) Kathakali Club (20.12.’92) also raises the question of the “suitability” of the means of Kathakali to the recounting of particular narratives. For him, “Kathakali does not provide a language that can be used to write any story.” The issue of what is “fitting” narrative to Kathakali clearly takes on ideological and political significance in the elaborations of other respondents; particularly by many of those who regard themselves as being part of an elite of appreciators and who also belong to Kathakali clubs.

**On Stages of Learning for an “Appreciator”:** **M.V. Radha Krishnan** was a twenty-seven year old teacher and member of the Warier caste whom I interviewed at the performance space sponsored by the Mangod Kathakali Club (12.12.‘92). His responses to the interview are given in full because they provide such a strongly contrasting and elitist perspective in comparison to those subjects interviewed at temple festival performance spaces and quoted above. However, there are apparently internal contrasts and contradictions that emerge
within his responses when the full text of his remarks is considered. He chose to
give the interview in English.

*I live nearby and I am a member of the Kathakali Club. I usually come to any
performance offered by the club or I go to temple performances. I usually
appreciate the performances from evening until morning.*

He distinguishes himself very clearly as a member of the elite, not only by
his membership of Kathakali club but by the “appreciator” status reflected
in his choice of verbs for participation in the performances.

*My first encounter was when I was six or seven years old when I went with my
mother. I just saw the actors; I can’t say that I appreciated it. I just watched the
actors... there was a fight between two big creatures and I used to appreciate it
very much; and my mother was telling me all these stories and I used to
appreciate (that) also... I was about seven years old then. I am now twenty-seven.
So it was about twenty years ago.*

His conditioning to the use of “appreciate” with its elitist connotation
seems to be recognised here when he finds it necessary to revise that
status down from “appreciator” to “spectator” (“I just watched the
actors...”) as a child. This response has a further acknowledgement
embedded within it: that of his progression from popular spectator in
childhood to elitist appreciator as an adult.

*Once a month I usually go, to the temple performances usually. The club
performances are very few in this area. This club usually conducts one program
in a month, the second Saturday in every month. I see the club performances
every month and then, if there are temple performances nearby, I see them also,
perhaps twenty performances in a year.*

Why?

*I can appreciate the matters contained in them; and also I am very much
interested in it.*

When you say that you “can appreciate” it, what do you have in mind?

*I know the theme of the story, the theme of the art. I know the combination of all
of these art that is why I can appreciate and I usually do. And sometimes some
person may be addicted to this art and so, without hesitation, they will travel
around in order to appreciate it. I am not at that level of addiction but I usually
go around everywhere.*

Special attraction?

*There is a performance by Kalamandalam Balasthramanian. He is a young
artiste but an outstanding/dominant one; that is why I am so interested this
evening. The economic burden is there, because you have to take tickets (five
rupees), and I am ready to pay such an amount because there is such a
performance. For a temple performance there is not that problem; we can just go*
there and appreciate the performance without any cost. It is the particular noted actors in particular roles, not just Kalamandalam Balasubramanian but others too, that attract me so much. The role of Bahuka is being played by Kalamandalam Balasubramanian.

Favourite play?

All Kathakali stories are equal; but I think “Nala Charitam”, which is performed over four evenings, is my preferred play.

Why?

There are emotional scenes there; that is, very close to our life; that is, very much interested/entrusted in “Nala Charitam”. By “close to our life” I mean that there are sorrows and miseries and all these evils, etc., in our life; and that is contained in all of these four stories.

Favourite character?

I think maybe Krishna.

Why?

What attracts me about him is his performance/behaviour in different times: if it is necessary, he will help people and, if it is necessary, he will kill. He responds to different situations in different ways.

He is very flexible?

Yes, flexible. And if we go to the “Mahabharata stories” we can see that once he was encouraging Arjuna to kill his teacher himself. At the same time he is giving and also standing in his principles itself.

Importance of knowing details of the evening’s program in advance?

If it is available, if we know the name of the story, then it is (easy?). If the actors are covered, then what will be the story we are ready to accept. It is quite useful and beneficial to know the name of the story... but the name of the story is not the most important factor. It is the name of the actors that is most important. If we know they are good actors; and if they are of a certain category, then we will go. For high-ranking actors, it doesn’t matter what the story is; I will go.

He further distinguishes himself as a member of the elite appreciators by his interest, above all, in the expertise and experience of the actors in the program, rather than details of the story that they are to enact.

Staying on for the full-night’s program?

Nowadays I usually go after the first story. A few years back I used to appreciate (the performance) all night. Now I have to work the next morning and other burdens that will prevent me staying on all night. In my student days I used to be able to stay all night and go to class without any burden, but now it has become difficult.
Regarding equal accessibility to all performance determinants by spectators?

I don’t think so. First of all he must know the story. Next one; it is a combination of all different arts and he must have some knowledge about all of these different arts: the (not clear), etc., and also the music, etc. He must know something about all of these things, otherwise he can’t enjoy. And a layman can do nothing with Kathakali, a layman or an illiterate person. He may be a literate person also. He may be a well-educated person, but if he doesn’t know the story, he can do nothing with Kathakali.

He articulates progression in stages and the development of competencies particular to Kathakali but he re-iterates that knowledge of the story is the essential starting point for this progression. He also makes several implicit references not only to co-presence but also to co-penetration of performance determinants and of the need for an elitist appreciator to have an understanding of all of the determinants and to adopt an aesthetic principle that recognises the co-penetration of them. He says: “I know the combination of all of these arts that is why I can appreciate and I usually do”; "He must know something about all of these things, otherwise he can’t enjoy”. The elitism expressed in this interview draws upon the meta-performance discourses of Kathakali and the ability of elitist spectators to recognise and articulate the same.

If he is a Hindu and he lives in this community, wouldn’t he know the story already?

As for being a Hindu, he may know something about the story, but he doesn’t know the details; and also every nook and corner of the story. I know a lot of friends who are Hindus and they don’t know all of these stories in detail. They know things generally, but not in detail and they can’t appreciate all these.

Is there anything that you can’t fully understand or enjoy in Kathakali?

Sometimes it can be difficult to appreciate Kathakali, even for me: the stories by Kottayath, that is, the originator or introducer of Kathakali. If I am appreciating his stories, it can be difficult to understand everything. Although the songs are expressed in Malayalam, it is in Sanskrit.

More Sanskritised?

Yes. And we don’t know all of the meanings of all these Sanskrit words.

How is your knowledge of the mudras then?

If they relate to common practice or experience we can understand mudras. As for a person in my condition, I can understand almost all mudras.
Why, then, do you have difficulties with some of the plays you mentioned a moment ago?

The word expressed by the musician and the mudra expressed by the actor cannot (be) coincide... and also cannot be followed. And also a person who is appreciative should know about the music as well as the performance of the art; and sometimes it becomes impossible.

He raises the difficulty of locating the subtleties of gestures in translation between sung Malayalam and mudra because the former, even in cyclical repetition and extension in order to encompass the duration of the actor’s mudra articulation, does not coincide precisely with the latter.

What is your perception of the people who go to temple performances? And their relationship to Kathakali?

Most of them are going to this sacred ceremony and this sacred art also. On that basis they are going and they know Hindu mythology and the Puranas. This way they can understand. They can follow part of the story; that is why they are going. Common people don’t know all of these stories in detail; to appreciate the art fully, one must know all of the details of the stories. The common people can’t follow all of these things in detail.

His description of the popular spectators attending temple-festival performances to some extent agrees with Coomaraswamy’s description of those who adopt what the art historian describes as traditional aesthetics: their attitude is devotional and their broad cultural knowledge of the Puranas and the Hindu epics gives the unfolding narratives enacted in Kathakali sufficient familiarity as to make them interesting and attractive, even spell-binding. The performance is for Coomaraswamy, and possibly these spectators, attractive, not simply to itself, but attractive to something other: to a metaphysical dimension.

Is your appreciation improving with participation at successive performances?

Yes. Year by year it improves and we can go through different (stages). First of all you appreciate the fighting and so on; and after, this person appreciates all of the actions of the actor; and at this level he can move to the music or to some other parts of Kathakali.

He provides elaboration of the progression through stages of self-instruction that can be achieved by the interested spectator to Kathakali. He
supports my view that spectators can become appreciators through their own interest and dedication.

Through one’s own presence at performance or with other specialised education?

No. No. Special education is not required. He must know Malayalam very well and he must know some words of Sanskrit also - with this he can enjoy the (fact) and he can improve; and he must have imagination also. A broader imagination will improve his appreciating capacity also.

At this point he is in disagreement with his earlier observation that “a layman can do nothing with Kathakali”. He also provides a further dimension of agreement with Coomaraswamy’s view of traditional aesthetics, that is, the holistic one: the aesthetic importance of the touch of imagination in order to support intellectual processes.

And for his understanding of the musical dimension?

These skills also, as they are performed, he can understand... and if he refers to these books, the stories of the Kathakali plays, (he can improve).

This comment provides further elaboration of the self-instruction that is offered to spectators of Kathakali in the development of particular competencies through interested observation of the performance, across all of its various determinants.

Is there anything in Kathakali which you dislike?

No, (but) Kathakali in its present form is not in its pure (note well) condition. It has been adulterated. “Pure condition” means Kathakali in its origin, that is, as introduced by Kothayath. Present day Kathakali stories are not following the same principles and themes. For example, there is a story, “Manava Vijayam”, a story written a few years back. In this story, a new idea is introduced and expressed through Kathakali. I can’t accept this view. (Also) the nature of young actors (is displeasing); they are just following the views of their predecessors and I wish to say that they have to understand the structure of Kathakali; but they have to develop their own ideas, their own view; not just play in mere imitation.

Concerning contemporary plays, such as those by Iyyamkode Sreedharan?

(Partial tape loss at this point)... “pure” and “adulterated”, Kathakali is not the art to express their view. “Peace” and “the overthrowing of capitalism”, and so on, may be a good theme, but Kathakali is not the medium to express these views.

How, then, to maintain the “purity”? 
With regard to the music and with regard to the dance, and all these things, the music must be in this way, etc., with regard to “raga”, “tala”, etc. Now, in the modern world, they are just liberating and liberalising all these things: it is no longer necessary to follow this in this way or that in that way. That is why I mentioned “dilution” in the contemporary world. We can’t (give) expression (to) the themes (proposed by Iyyamkode Sreedharan) through this art.

Even if he followed the structural conventions rigourously?

That is the problem. You can express your idea through some other art.

What contemporary ideas, then, are acceptable in terms of maintaining the “purity”?

The ideas must derive from the “Purana” of Hindu mythology. That will be the original and also pure Kathakali. That is my view.

M.V. Radha Krishnan’s remarks about the suitability of material for performance in Kathakali and its restriction to the Puranic stories embody not only the aesthetic plane of meta-performance discourse, but also the conservative politics which Iyyamkode Sreedharan (See Chapter Eight) calls “fundamentalism”. This fundamentalist perspective is not necessarily characteristic of all of the elitist appreciators who frequent Kathakali clubs. The aesthetics of meta-performance discourses can be distinguished from the conservative politics of fundamentalism.

There is offered in the following interview a strong contrast in views about the significance of “purity” and “adulteration” and also about the accessibility of Kathakali and the ground for learning enabled by its performance processes. The interview is reported here in full.

On the Elusive “Kathakalic” Factor: T.S. Madhavan Kutty is a thirty-eight year old Doctor of Ayurvedic Medicine and a member of the Warier caste. He was interviewed in the auditorium of the Trichur Regional Theatre, which is sponsored by the Trichur Kathakali Club. His interview, which he chose to give in English, clearly reveals him to be a connoisseur of Kathakali and an articulate one.

In response to some of my questions he adopts the neologism “Kathakalic”, which for me bears out the above-quoted observation of Bourdieu
(1984:66), that “the art-lover, in a sense surrendering himself to the work, can internalise its principles of construction, without these ever being brought to his consciousness and formulated or formulable as such; and this is what makes all the difference between the theory of art and the experience of the connoisseur”. The use of “Kathakalic” in this interview seems to me an attempt to over-reach the vocabulary of articulated rationality and to strive for a more ineffable quality of performance. I suggest that this ineffable dimension, here the crux of “Kathakalic”, is the aesthetic outcome of the holistic co-penetration of all of the various performance determinants. I also find support for the aesthetic contention that I make on co-penetration of determinants and the inability of connoisseurs to rationally articulate every experience. In De Certeau’s (1997:141) observation in his discussion of “culture in the plural”, he says: “In other words, a work cannot be grasped when the laws that unconsciously control it are exhumed.”

I have travelled about one hundred kilometres (for this performance), from Kottakkal. I am not a member of this club. I shall stay for the full night’s program.

Earliest recalled memory?

In Kottakkal there is a Kathakali troupe and it is very nearby my house. I had constant contact with those people at the training school from my earliest memories. The very vigourous training programs were going on next door to me, so I grew up with the songs and the drumming and all of that from early morning, when they started, at 04.30 or so.

Frequency of attendance?

The Kathakali season would be from December until April and in that time I usually see three or four performances a month. Most of those performances are nearer to Kottakkal itself.

Searching out performances?

I came to Trichur on this occasion only for this performance because the story that is going to be performed is a very rare one (a rarely performed story). Of the performances that I see, half of them would be club performances and half would be performances at temple festivals. My small son usually accompanies me nowadays because there is nobody to take care of him.

Impressive elements of Kathakali?
It was not from the training programs, but from the performance, of course... the costumes are very striking. My family members used to go regularly to Kathakali. The mythology, the stories are very familiar to us; so I was able to follow the performances. In childhood we do have some problems to follow the gestures, but we can make out the total effect.

Special attraction?

I don’t know what it is exactly, but after seeing a Kathakali performance I feel that I have gained something. I can’t explain it exactly.

Entertainment/education gain?

There may be a number of factors for this type of Kathakali, this type of story, then there is certainly something learned. It’s a very rare story; and the formalism of this Kathakali, the very technical aspects, offer gains in learning, which may be of help in appreciating the lighter stories. And at the level of entertainment, I think that witnessing a classical art is gainful not only to the mind, but also to the intellect; I hope. So my maturity, my life, will be more strengthened.

What kinds of formalisms or structure set this apart from others?

In traditional acting, “abhinayam”, there are so many guide-lines; but every style of art has got its own peculiar way of acting - and this Kathakali has got many of its own peculiarities; for example, while performing many arts depend upon the face, but Kathakali makes use of all the body. So they have got their own techniques: an artiste uses not only the eyes, the lips, and so on, but all the movements of the body. In this type of Kathakali, if the artiste is not competent enough to work solely with his face, the total effect may be produced through other means. So it is more “Kathakalic”. That’s what I am expressing here when I refer to formalism, to be more “Kathakalic”.

Earlier stories?

Not necessarily just the earlier stories. Tonight’s program may be seen as contemporary, perhaps, to “Nala Charitam”, from about three hundred and fifty years ago; but “Nala Charitam” is more popular. The popularity of “Nala Charitam” started much later. But this type of story is much used in the training programs of Kathakali so they can perform more effectively the other stories.

Due to a more Sanskritised story?

No. It’s not related to the language, but to the “Kathakalic” factors.

Have you got a favourite play?

I have got favourite performances, not a play. My favourite actors, for example, Kalamandalam Raman Kutty Nair, only because, in my opinion, he is more “Kathakalic”...His adaptation of the tempo, of the “bhavam”, it is just marvelous. While the tempo is very much, for example, in this type of story, there are so many pieces which are in very slow tempo. So it is slow tempo “padam”.
they have to work hard. There may be so many Kathakali themes which are so impression; certainly, they may be impressive to me. But there are other factors. There is a terminology which is called “taortha pregam” which means three factors: music, drum beat and dance. These three factors constitute “taortha pregam”. Kathakali is very rich in these three.

Have you got a favourite character?

Not so much a favourite character as a favourite type of character: I prefer “Katti” characters (“'knife', the make-up of arrogant and evil characters who have a streak of valour” [Bolland, 1980:147]). Even though the “Katti” may be Ravana7 or Duryodhana or any other. The “Katti” has got its own qualities and functions that contribute a lot.

Importance of knowing program details in advance?

The program is usually well published; but there have been a few, five to ten, performances in the past where I have gone to the performance not knowing the stories that are to be played and not knowing the actors either, in advance.

Equal access to all performance determinants for all spectators?

It depends. I think that someone who does not know the gestures can follow, but he must have a knowledge of Indian mythology. If he is aware of these things, he can follow Kathakali.

All in the Hindu community?

I don’t know. In my professional experience at the Ayurvedic centre we are used to having so many foreigners and we also have a Kathakali troupe. At certain times I have been engaged to look after these foreigner visitors. We used to perform a Kathakali program for one or two hours and I used to sit and give a running commentary. More than once these visitors have said, after half an hour or so, "Please, stop. Your sound is disturbing me.” That means that this foreign man doesn’t know Indian mythology, nor Kathakali terminology, but even so he is following it. There have been so many experiences like that. So I hope that everyone can follow Kathakali; but he must have a fondness, a liking, he must be attuned to Kathakali.

Is there anything that you are unable to appreciate in Kathakali?

There may be particular performances of an actor or of a singer that I don’t like, particularly if he is employing things that are not appropriate to this era. There may be very old concepts. That kind, I don’t like. It must be made relevant to the present time. For example, there was a very eminent Kathakali performer, Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, and in those moments of improvisation, he used to do so many things. In our country at that time, there was so much awareness of family planning. There is one story, “Santana Gopala”, which has a Brahmin who has got ten children and at that time he used to expound the family planning concept.

Improving appreciation with participation at successive performances?
I don’t know. How can we measure it? It may be improving. I am not aware of it. I don’t take notice/care of this aspect.

Dislikes?
(There was a small technical problem in the recording at this point.) …

You were saying that nowadays there are many artistes that seem to be “diluting” that concept of Kathakali that you have.

Yes. That is, many Kathakali artistes may be...Take the example of “vesham”...the dance. There may be actors who like the role of Nala and who have developed it well, but they bring the role of Nala to other stories, not performing the character of the particular story, but bringing the features of Nala to that particular character. Take, for example, “Kirmira Vadha”. The main character is Dharmaputra. It is a very “Kathakalic” role. It is a masterpiece of “Paccha, ‘Green’, the make-up of heroic, kingly and divine characters” [Bolland, 1980:148]. You can say it is the total of Paccha. Nala is not like that. There is more that is Nala than is Paccha.

The interviews of both Madhavan Kutty and M.V. Radha Krishnan very definitely provide voices from the elitist, appreciators of Kathakali. Both also draw attention to the evolution of a more complex aesthetic with the successive development of an appreciation of the diverse, co-present performance determinants; and also to the additional meta-performance refinement of awareness of their inter-layering and co-penetrating processes. Both of these subjects refer to the “adulteration” of Kathakali. Whereas M.V.Radha Krishnan takes a quite conservative position firmly opposed to any modification which can be seen to detract from what he regards as the “purity” of his own envisioned “original state” of Kathakali, Madhavan Kutty is dissatisfied with Kathakali performances which cannot reflect a relevance to contemporary issues. Failure to recognise the eclecticism of Kathakali in its historical development and the need to predicate some original, pristine, pure state of Kathakali underscores the positioning of those appreciators who reject all modifications which cannot be argued to be rooted in the Puranic texts.

Interestingly, throughout the interview, Madhavan Kutty organises his own thoughts on the impressive elements and attractive features of Kathakali in an evolutionary development. It springs initially from elements of spectacle, from the costuming, and then proceeds to the more complex co-presence and co-
penetration of performance determinants in his discussion of the notion of *taortha pregam*, which designates the three factors of music, drum beat and dance.

The spectacular elements of Kathakali are readily accessible to all spectators across the spectrum: to those who are most impoverished of spectator competencies, to the popular spectator as well as to the elitist appreciator, to the foreigner as well as the local Hindu spectator. Madhavan Kutty does not suggest, however, that for the spectators, even foreigners as spectators, their levels of appreciation are necessarily confined only to those elements of the performance which are spectacular. On the contrary, he allows repeatedly for the complexity of the popular spectator/elitist appreciator processes. He also allows for the unarticulated, the indefinable, the ineffable in the analysis of his own participation as an appreciator. He acknowledges the seductive elements of the sheer spectacle of Kathakali, which may quickly induce naïve, casual spectators, whether they are local or foreign, children or adults, to become attuned to Kathakali. Most of the respondents make no explicit reference to intellect but Madhavan Kutty does draw intellect into the discussion of his aesthetics. His comments place no particular importance on the narrative.

M.V. Radha Krishnan less consciously articulates a similar sense of evolution from spectacle to story to the need for an aesthetic that incorporates, from my own perspective, the co-penetration of performance determinants within performance appreciators. He does so when he refers to his own development.

> My first encounter was when I was six or seven years old when I went with my mother. I just saw the actors. I can’t say that I appreciated it. I just watched the actors... there was a fight between two big creatures and I used to appreciate it very much; and my mother was telling me all these stories and I used to appreciate (that) also... I was about seven years old then. I am now twenty-seven. So it was about twenty years ago. (12.12.’92, Mangod)

However, M.V. Radha Krishnan, as an appreciator, is unable to express any regard for those more contemporary performance elements that have eclectically evolved within the traditions of Kathakali. Particularly if they signify a departure from his own notion of the “original stories” and the “purity” of
Kathakali as conceived within the Puranic literature. Those who voice this conservative position often identify their contemporary *bête noire* very readily in the form of Iyyamkode Sreedharan who, in turn, labels his strongest opponents as “fundamentalists” (See Chapter Eight).

**Conclusions**

It is clear from the interviews that the sheer spectacle of Kathakali can readily seduce spectators to become “attuned” to it. They become willing to watch and listen attentively to all of its performance determinants; even to sit through the night-long programs in the crowded and sometimes cramped confines of a communal event, on the dusty village squares adjacent to the temples of rural Kerala.

Many of the respondents seem implicitly to affirm my point that without knowledge of the story, such spectators cannot progress in their quest for self-learned performance competencies. But I want to re-iterate that the traditional Puranic stories of Kathakali are the ingrained cultural fabric of Hindu India. They are heard, seen and learned, sung and told, and iconographically reproduced, in temples, village squares, market places, schools and homes. For the non-Hindu spectator, knowledge of the stories provides some similar performance competencies to those local spectators who are naïve to Kathakali. Once seduced by the more spectacular processes of its performances and once attuned, attentively to watch and listen to all of the co-present performance determinants of song, dance, acting, mudra and percussion, that constitute Kathakali, it is the spectators’ knowledge of the stories that will move them on in the development of spectator competencies. The Malayalee speakers, of course, enjoy the advantage of being able to understand the singers’ narratives in Malayalam and, therefore, readily have access to a translation of the mudra narration undertaken by the actors. The element of bakhti (devotion) brought to performance by some devotees imbues their perception of Kathakali with processes of divine imaging drawn from the determinants of performance, from
a “Kathakalic” treatment of the already familiar narrative details. These spectators are enriched at a metaphysical level by the performance. Whether devotee or not, those elitist appreciators who have at their disposal the means to articulate their own aesthetics of meta-performance discourses may acknowledge that their appreciation of the moments of co-penetration of performance determinants, the enjoyment of the most highly refined “Kathakalic” moments, is characterised by something ineffable. On the continuum of performance competencies that range from those of popular spectators to those of elitist appreciators the common and bridging ground is knowledge of the stories. I assert, however, that the aesthetics that underpins this notion of elitism espoused self-styled appreciators is quite distinct from the conservative politics from which derive the notions of “original purity” of Kathakali and “appropriate sources” of its stories, notions often argued by the more zealous, conservative appreciators. These “fundamentalist” attitudes are further explored in Chapter Eight.
Chapter Eight: Politics of the “popular”.

Culture in the singular always imposes the law of a power. A resistance needs to be directed against the expansion of a force that unifies by colonising, and that denies at once its own limits and those of others. At stake is a necessary relation of every cultural production with death that limits it and with battle that defends it. Culture in the plural endlessly calls for a need to struggle. (De Certeau, 1997:139)

Introduction

Kathakali is being re-worked by the left-wing propagandist and ideologue, Iyyamkode Sreedharan. In this chapter I provide a close-up of his re-working of Kathakali and his assessment of his own enterprise. He made the very self-reflective observations that I report here in an interview and in his own notes, to which he generously allowed me access. He elaborates upon his notion of fundamentalism, in reference to the conservative voices that are critical of his own attempts to bring more secular themes to the performance dynamics of Kathakali.

The formulations of Sreedharan’s discourse provide good ground for an exploration of the notions of popular and elitist aesthetic judgements, some aspects of which have been considered in Chapter Seven. In the latter part of this chapter I look at definitions of “popular” that have proved useful to other writers on performance generally and I look at the bearing that they may have had on my own considerations of the term “popular” within the context of Sreedharan’s politics. Western performance analyst, Michael Booth (1983) sets out some definitions of “popular” that I think correlate to some degree with the aims of Sreedharan’s attempts to “popularise” Kathakali. Tom Burvill and Christopher Campos also provide references to the “anti-hegemonic nature” of popular theatre in the West and give what I see as parallels to the processes of Sreedharan’s work.
An essential element of popular performance for me is the notional “boundary” experiences that characterise it. For example, there is evidence in my field notes of spectators maintaining apparently fluid boundaries between mythic and mundane time/space and between the identities of actor and character. Such boundary conditions may arise at diverse points within the spectator’s interaction with performance. The notion initially came to my attention through such writers on performance as Booth, Burvill and Campos. Sreedharan, himself, alludes to crossing other boundary conditions when he refers to the aspiration of the founder of the Kalamandalam, the poet Vallathol, that performance arts might contribute to the removal of divisions of humanity by “man-made barriers of language, religion and land”. He also makes reference to the interpolation of time in Kathakali as a further removal of boundaries that facilitates his introducing historical characters from widely diverse periods in a shared temporal context. I see his remarks on time as relating to the traditional underpinning of mythic truths, which permeates the psyche of both popular spectators and elitist appreciators of Kathakali alike. Here also the mythical time of Kathakali crosses a notional boundary and provides for a “universal” character to both groups. Mythic reality does not depend on the acquisition of further performance competencies, which are acquired through a familiarity with specific performance determinants and which may also provide boundaries for distinction between elitist and popular groups.

In local reception processes brought to bear on traditional Hindu performance genres, there is a further characteristic that I regard as popular and which does not usually figure in performance writing in the West: the contribution of religious culture provides an additional interlay of what can be considered a popular dimension. Devotional attitudes are brought to performances, for example, the reverence shown to Krishna by some spectators at performances (See Chapter Six) or the nominating of Ayyappan’s story as a personal favourite in Kathakali because of health boons granted after supplication to that god (See Chapter Nine).
Although Sreedharan’s secular themes move radically away from the appeal of this traditional religious dimension, they may nevertheless also be exploiting, in performance strategies, the mythic realities that underpin the religious and devotional attitudes. The success of Sreedharan’s attempts to popularise Kathakali may be measured in the number of performances of his blatantly political plays given both inside and outside of Kerala. This has often been before groups that were not familiar with the genre and may not have had links with the religious traditions of Hindu epics and Puranic literature. A further measure of his successful popularising of Kathakali is the acceptance by cultural groups, such as the Fine Arts Societies of Kerala, which, although familiar with the traditions of the genre, had tended to shun its more traditional performances because of a perceived lack of contemporary relevance in their conservative themes. The wider support for Sreedharan’s project that has come from political parties and other secular cultural groups may in part be explained by Kerala’s recent history of left-wing politics.

The Political Culture of Kerala

The political culture in Kerala has developed in parallel with a very fine general education system, in the context of India. Kerala has been outstanding in providing education across rural/urban, male/female and high caste/low caste barriers. Education in this state has provided a level of economic and social mobility and a loosening of traditional social structures that is to the fore in India (Franke and Chasin, 1992:47.74). The region saw the influences of British colonialism from 1792 when the Malabar Coast was annexed. From 1905 onwards the development by Indians of caste improvement associations began to have an impact on rigid, traditional social organisation. These movements may have taken their impetus from the teaching of Nineteenth Century Hindu reformer Swami Vivekenand (ibid. p.75) and from the liberalism towards social structures that was promulgated by western education in Christian missionary schools (Menon, 1991:332). The Russian Revolution
also provided an effective model for the emerging trade unions and the
organising of the poor in Kerala. There was a strong push for the right to
literacy, both through government-sponsored policy and popular mass
movement. These factors, amongst others, culminated in the election of the
first communist led government in 1957 and ensuing radical land reforms.
While Kerala’s general education system is held to be at least as good as any in
India, it is nevertheless widely acknowledged that a superior education is to be
had in the private, English language schools. Kerala has very high literacy rates
and also very high newspaper consumption (Franke and Chasin, 1992:53-4).
Vis-à-vis the rest of India, Kerala has a relatively peaceful climate with
harmonious inter-community and inter-caste relations. “Untouchables” hold
high-ranking positions within the government ministries and bureaucracies
(ibid. p.84). There has been a strong tradition of successive left-wing
governments. This wider leftist political context may explain in part the strong
support from party organisations for Sreedharan’s attempts to promulgate
popular and political propaganda through his work on Kathakali.

Formulations of Iyyamkode Sreedharan’s Discourse

The following notes are from a recorded interview with Sreedharan, a
writer and producer of Kathakali plays who was formerly Secretary of the
Kerala Kalamandalam. The interview was conducted in English at
Kollengode in the district of Palghat (Pallakad), on 2 January 1992. The Kerala
Kalamandalam can be seen to be developing, through public education, a wider
awareness of Kathakali. However, because it is a state apparatus, it is subject
to some restrictions. Nevertheless, Sreedharan describes himself as a person
free to undertake the promotion of Kathakali as he sees fit. The diverse fronts
on which he has undertaken the widening of Kathakali’s horizons include
having provided for a better general education of the performers-in-training at
the Kerala Kalamandalam. He has himself established an institute, at
Kollengode, in honour of the Malayalam poet, P.Khuniraman Nair, with whom
he worked for about ten years. It provides for the local people a cultural centre, a library, and training classes in Kathakali. Sreedharan writes contemporary plays of a secular and blatantly political nature for performance in Kathakali.

He is particularly concerned with two dimensions in his experimenting with contemporary, secular plays. One is “the educational element to develop the popularising of Kathakali”. The other is the adopting of new ideas and stories in Kathakali, which provides for “propaganda for political and social change”. De Certeau (1997:104) whose quotation on culture heads this chapter, defines “Cultural Politics” as that which could be considered the more or less coherent totality of objectives, means and actions aiming at modifying behaviour according to explicit principles or criteria.”

Iyyamkode Sreedharan’s work is then patently of the order of cultural politics.

However, the distinction that De Certeau draws between “cultural development” and “cultural revolution” has considerable bearing on the ways that one might perceive the efforts of Sreedharan to bring about change. De Certeau (1997:104) says: “Cultural development” submits to the law of homogeneous growth, the reforms needed for an extension of production or consumption. An ideology of continuity and, in particular, of the invariability of the socio-economic system upholds the concept of development and opposes it to those of “cultural revolution” or “structural” change.

In his own work Sreedharan retains the traditional character types and their conventional make-up, as was done, for example, in the production, in conjunction with David McRuvie, of Kathakali - King Lear. Sreedharan produced the Malayalam text for this play, which was presented at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1990, toured France in 1991 and, in 1999, had a season at the recently reconstructed Globe, Shakespeare’s theatre in London. He has also written and produced Manavavijayam: People’s Victory and at the time of the interview was working on Message of Love. Sreedharan sees the production of King Lear in Kathakali as “The first step of changing Kathakali as a universal art.” Despite this measure of universalising, he does not regard his work as changing the structure of Kathakali, but rather as
making modifications that may be seen as being more contemporary. He points to the eclectic nature of Kathakali and its acceptance of modifications over centuries. He sees Kathakali as a classical art form, some aspects of which, such as mudra, the elaborate system of gestures, cannot be reached by the ordinary people. He provides instructional introductions to his plays to improve popular understanding and he provides for a translation of mudra. This is not new practice: such a translational enhancement to the understanding of mudra has also been undertaken in the very orthodox settings of Kathakali clubs for elitist appreciators.

Sreedharan considers that the controversy surrounding his changes lies not so much in modification to the forms of Kathakali. Rather, for him, it lies in the radical departure from those traditional narratives, drawn from the epic and Puranic literature, and the introduction of his blatantly secular and political themes and of classical works from western cultures. Some of his opponents argue that his stories are utterly unsuited to Kathakali and that it can only be Kathakali if its themes remain within the traditions of Puranic literature. Others consider that the introduction of new secular and political discourses necessarily calls for new mudras and possible changes to the traditional dance compositions. Surely the dispute lies in whether these modifications really do grossly modify structure or whether they, along with the stories unfolded, are merely superficial to Kathakali’s forms.

Sreedharan’s work is undoubtedly revolutionary in its widening social dimensions and appeal but it may still be seen as couched in the traditional structures of Kathakali. The dispute that he provokes may ultimately be identified in the contrast of conservative and liberal politics that are inherent both to the wider culture and to the performance worlds. These wider political currents should not be ignored in a discussion of what constitutes traditional structure in Kathakali. The wider political context that I open here is, I think, consistent with the De Certeau quotation at the opening of this paragraph, and also the one referring to “culture in the singular” and the imposition of a law of power, which heads this chapter.
The following observations are from some of Sreedharan’s personal written notes that he kindly provided for me during my interview with him at his house.

No art in the world as you know came to being on its own. The art forms evolved and developed as reflections of socio-economical changes in different periods of time. Aware of this fact or not, many have criticised the experiments taking place in the field of performing arts. Those who are attributing absolute religious invocations to the performing arts are in fact denying the scientific realms of human developments.

The traditional arts might have possessed communal or religious structure in their formative periods. But with the changing aesthetic perceptions those structures did not vanish. The best example is Kathakali, which borrowed from many a form of art to ensure its survival. Therukkoothu (folk drama of Tamil Nadu), Teyyam (ritual art form of North Malabar) and Kuttiyattam (existing Sanskrit drama tradition of Kerala) obviously developed Kathakali. Although the Hindu Fundamentalists stamp Kathakali as a Hindu art, Kathakali has welcomed many elements outside the Hindu cultural character. The female character in Kathakali, I mean the make-up and dressing, and also the head-gear of Hanuman are resembling the Muslim cultural traditions.

We are bound to accept those aspects of our culture for the promotion of man’s progress. All the traditional arts need not be preserved. Those advocating communalism and religious hatred shall have a natural death.

Some forms of arts need to be preserved just for the understanding of man’s progress over a period of time. But there are other arts that keep aesthetic relevance to the contemporary tastes, such as Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Manipuri and Bharatanatyam. In these arts, there is scope for experiments ensuring their visual enrichments.

In 1989, Kerala Kalamandalam made a new attempt to adapt a well-known Shakespearean drama, King Lear, as Kathakali. Dr David McRuvie, an Australian English Professor abridged the story in nine scenes and I translated as Attakatha (Kathakali style). Veteran Kathakali artists like Shri Padmanabhan Nair and Kumaran Nair jointly directed the play, proving that European classics are not alien to the culture of Kathakali in form and content. We were invited to perform Kathakali King Lear on twenty stages in Western Europe in 1989. We participated in nearly fifteen international festivals in Spain, France, Italy, Belgium and Holland. It was a thrilling experience. We were invited to give twenty more performances in France and Spain. That shows the acceptability of the new play.

Manava Vijayam and Kathakali King Lear symbolise the realisation of the dream of Vallathol (the Malayalee Poet who founded the Kerala Kalamandalam), who hoped that a day would come, when people all over the world, divided by man-made barriers of language, religion and land, would get together like a family.

If the purpose of art is to emancipate man from the clutches of disruptive forces, themes, whether Indian, foreign or contemporary, cannot be a stumbling block. This has been proved by Kathakali King Lear. (Field notes, Kollengode, 2.1.'92)
The following observations are drawn from Sreedharan’s notes for the program for the Indian tour of his play “People’s Victory”:

The six-scener dance drama opens with Scientists the world over appealing to World Conscience to help defeat the march of Imperialist powers and their blackmail through nuclear arms to ushering in an era of World Peace.

At this, peace-loving people mobilise themselves to halt the arms race and the star-war melodrama of the ruling cliques.

Ultimately, the merchants of war are vanquished and World Peace reigns supreme.

“The message of humanism the play conveys will appeal even to the apolitical,” said E.M.S. Namboodiripad after its inauguration at Palghat, Kerala in December 1986.

In *People’s Victory* the characters were cast into the traditional facial make-up categories (See Introduction) as follows. *World Conscience* was played in Paccha make-up, the category of green faces and golden crowns, that immediately identifies characters as being kingly, heroic, divine types. *The Forces of Imperialism*, however, were made-up within the Chuvanna Tadi (Red Beard) character type: the vicious and vile characters whose faces are mainly black on the top half and red on the lower and whose crowns of red and white are far larger than those of the Paccha characters. Both *The Scientists* (Rishis, sages) and *The People* (female) were cast as Minukku make-up types. This category traditionally includes male sages, charioteers, Brahmins and messengers and female characters that may be heroines or servants, or demonesses in disguise.

Sreedharan says that he has drawn “The People” as female characters because he sees them as “not being organised, as being fearful and as thinking about war and so on”. The troupe involved nine actors, two singers, two drummers and the writer/producer himself. On each occasion Iyyamkode Sreedharan provided a very instructive introduction to the performance, referring to mudras (elaborate hand gestures), bhavam (emotional condition of
the character portrayed), costume, terminology and the symbols that he has adopted for this particular play.

He gave me to understand that throughout the two hundred odd performances that were given, occasional changes were made to the troupe, according to the availability of individual members. The kind of flexibility that is provided by Kathakali to such cast changes meant that only one rehearsal was necessary in such cases; an actor would then be able confidently to take his place in the troupe. This kind of easy, one-rehearsal modification is only open to the rigidly stylised and highly conventionalised classical forms, such as Bharata Natyam or Kathakali. In the case of this play, there were some changes made to the battle scenes, with modification to the traditional kalasham (dance composition).

Sreedharan is sure that at this troupe’s performances the spectators’ lack of familiarity with the genre was bridged by his own didactic speech of introduction to Kathakali, which he generally followed with an outline of the particular story and the system that he had adopted for his story. The production subsequently travelled outside of Kerala and played to non-Malayalee spectators, as in Bangalore, Delhi and Calcutta. A running commentary provided a translation of the mudras adopted in segments of the performance on those occasions.

Sreedharan remarked that the Fine Arts Societies of Kerala extended an invitation to the writer/producer to present The People’s Victory under their auspices because “they saw it as being relevant”. This response came as a surprise to him because they had usually tended to support Bharata Natyam and European style dramas but to shun the performance of more traditional style Kathakali performances. He sees the supporters of the Fine Arts Societies as being in the main white-collar workers. He says that after the first performance to such an audience, word quickly spread amongst like groups that “this play was in a classical structure but was very contemporary and progressive in its themes”.
I can summarise the success of the play by pointing out that it was eventually performed on seventy-two occasions to the members of Fine Arts Societies in such places as Trivandrum, Quilon, Ernakulam and Calicut, in Kerala. The subscription members of these societies often provided audiences of fifteen hundred or two thousand spectators, and in Trivandrum, the capital, four thousand. For subsequent tours outside of Kerala, the performances were often organised by Malayalee cultural organisations, as was done, for example, in Delhi, Bangalore, Calcutta and Madras. In Trichi the invitation came from a Tamil cultural organisation.

“Message of Love”

Message of Love, which deals with current political and cultural issues in India, discusses contemporary revivalism, wherein Sreedharan, the author, identifies what he labels as “fundamentalism”, in Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Sreedharan sees this play, too, as taking the traditional structures of Kathakali and imbuing them with new symbols. One of the main characters is the prophet Mohammed. The following italicised comments are from Sreedharan in interview.

In Kathakali there are already so many Muslim characters; even in the Puranic stories there are references to Muslims. So there is no problem in introducing Muslim characters to this play. However, this play is only the second time that a Christian character has been drawn in Kathakali. There exists an earlier play, largely unperformed, in which reference is made to Mary Magdalene.

In Message of Love the author includes among his characters Jesus Christ, St. Thomas, Mohammed and Sri Krishna. He does not see any problem in “mixing time, because Kathakali has no barriers or time limits”.

Puranic and Vedic stories are conceptions without historical time. Time is no problem. The characters of Kathakali are also alive today. They live in the minds of people. When Krishna is coming they love to see him; they are all coming.

I see this fluid boundary condition in the treatment of time as providing a further enhancement to the popularising of Sreedharan’s works. In this play he
also draws on the popularity of Krishna, the cult figure of traditional devotional attitudes, and transposes him to a more secular discourse. In so doing he also transplants a vestige of the mythic time created by the Hindu epics; mythic time in which to locate other historical characters.

Within the process of popularising and universalising Kathakali, Sreedharan emphasises that his messages are not only “political”, but also “cultural”: the former deriving from the play’s treatment of contemporary issues, the latter from “traditional Kathakali which is in the blood of the people; the popular, lowest level of society”. He is very conscious of the derivative and adaptive nature of Kathakali over the centuries, pointing out its borrowings from the traditional martial arts, from folk performing arts, from Payadam (religious ritualistic dance) and from Teyyam (religious ritual performance) (See Chapter Four). He points out that from this latter form, which is about seven hundred years old, there have been derived elements of costuming and make-up now in use in Kathakali; and also from it there has been adopted the chendar to accompany the earlier maddalam in Kathakali percussion.

European style drama has been developed in India over the last two centuries but Kathakali over nearly six hundred years. I can take the structure of Kathakali and mix in contemporary issues and move away from the old Puranic stories.

Moreover, he makes the point that Kathakali is characterised by development and change, as compared to Krishnattom (See Chapter Four), for example. He sees Krishnattom as having stagnated “because it is regarded as a ‘religious’ art form”. Whereas Kathakali “has accepted so many things, from the Islamic culture, from Christian culture”. Past great teachers have often made adaptations to make-up and to costume. An example of the former is provided by the paper chuttu, which were not always used in Kathakali, but were derived from Krishnattom and Kuttiyattam to enhance the decorative white border of rice paste and lime that follows the actor’s jaw line. The adaptability of Kathakali to incorporate aspects of diverse cultures is exemplified in the in costuming.
The Kathakali female costumes came from Muslim culture. You are looking at Hindu characters, wives of Hindu characters, but they are dressed in costumes derived from Islamic culture, for example, the wives of Nala or Bhima. These were adopted nearly two hundred years ago.

Sreedharan, on the basis of such incorporation of aspects from a different culture, declares that “Kathakali is not a Hindu religious form”. He asserts that it is its very eclectic and highly integrated nature, which draws on other cultures and other performance genres, that gives Kathakali a universal appeal that is not to be found, for example, in Krishnattom.

Irrespective of caste or religion, all sections of the community can appreciate Kathakali because it has adopted all of these things, all of these cultural elements. Some appreciate the costumes, some the rhythm, the percussive instruments, and only Karnatic music. So many artistic dimensions for appreciation are found in Kathakali: sculpture, gesture, costume, music, rhythm. Kathakali is a total harmony.

When he looks at the very popular nature of Kathakali in its traditional contexts, he does not allow the strong popular appeal of the religious themes to cloud the contribution that is also made by its performative dimensions. He points to the highly integrated nature of performance, its incorporating of diverse and sensational determinants that have appeal in popular culture; determinants which at the popular level dominate over the more hermetic code of mudra (gesture).

The simple popular level of appreciation of Kathakali encompasses all of these elements as a part of familiar, popular culture, not just the Puranic stories, but the shapes and colours of the spectacle, its own particular rhythms and music and the singing in Malayalam, their own vernacular. All have been a part of their own acculturation. The fine points of the mudras, which may not be accessible to them, are but a small part of the integrated complex of stimuli and of the cultural representation that inhere to Kathakali. They do not have to be educated up to any of these sensational elements of the performance. Kathakali is a “total” art. They do not know the mudras; they can’t grasp mudra.

Sreedharan’s quest to popularise Kathakali has not been without strong opposition from some quarters, from forces that he describes as “Religious Fundamentalism” and “Aesthetic Fundamentalism”. Through print, radio and television he has responded to their charges that he should not dilute or pollute the traditions of Kathakali with political issues, with contemporary issues, with
new stories. The “fundamentalist” perspective is underpinned by the notion that Kathakali is only for Puranic stories.

Amongst the arguments offered against his work, Sreedharan would discern an inability on the part of his opponents to perceive or to accept the multi-levelled appreciation of Kathakali. He points to those who, ignoring the integral nature of Kathakali’s diverse determinants, take from Kathakali only very selective dimensions, such as an appreciation of the mudras (gestures) or of bhavam (emotional condition of the character portrayed). Sreedharan thinks that when elitist appreciators of Kathakali assert that these selective dimensions constitute the maximum level of Kathakali, they ignore the impact that this integral art form has at the popular, village level. They ignore, for example, the very great popular appeal of the code of music within that integral performance.

“Appreciation” means “total appreciation”. They are criticising me for “diluting” Kathakali or “polluting” the classical form. My critics are arguing for an elite form of Kathakali. I am arguing for the people. What is the aim of art? What is the use of art? It is for the people. My critics are ignoring the developments that constitute the history of Kathakali.

The notion of “purity” is an absurdity because we are changing and adapting constantly through time, taking up ideas from so many places. We cannot talk about “purity”. Just look at Malayalam, our language; we are adopting so many words from Arabic and from English. As with language, so with culture, we are adopting so many things from so many places.

The notions of “purity” and “pollution” have long been argued and widely accepted (See Chapter Five) as a manifestation of the caste system. The purity/pollution discourse forms part of the view that the caste system is essentially of a religious nature and that its supreme sociological expression is to be found in the Brahmin caste. This point of view, focussing only on the religious dimension, seems to be widely expressed without regard to the political nature of caste structure. Sreedharan regards those who adopt these terms of purity and pollution within the discussion of Kathakali as very conservative people. He thinks that they must be viewed politically, and not simply religiously, and that they are, as such, reactionary. They seem to me to be seeking to impose upon the aesthetics of Kathakali an already unacceptable
religious notion drawn from the wider Hindu culture, that of purity and pollution, which is often proffered as a religious justification for the caste system. For Sreedharan, they represent an argument that seems to lead to a conclusion that Kathakali can only be really appreciated by the Namboothiri Brahmins, by the pundits, by an educated elite.

**The Survival of Caste-ism and the Dominance of Brahmin Aesthetics.**

Historically, I think an argument such as the purity/pollution one must have had even greater influence when the Namboothiri were regarded as exclusive patrons and traditional guardians of Kathakali. A perceived need to reinforce caste-ism and the Brahmin centric hegemony may have been particularly prevalent when radical land reforms were being ushered in. At that time the Namboothiri, who directly patronised performing arts, feared that the redistribution of land brought about by the government reforms was indirectly a threat to the survival of Kathakali, and other traditional performing arts in Kerala. However, Sreedharan asserts that the grounds for such fears should have been dispelled by successive governments having established and maintained the Kerala Kalamandalam and by other institutions having taken over the traditional roles of patronage that previously fell to the Namboothiri Brahmins.

At the same time, through the government land reforms and the establishment of state institutions to foster the performing arts, Sreedharan sees Kathakali as having become more available to a lower level of society, to the people. This has been achieved through familiarisation, particularly through the temple festival committees that assumed a greater role of patronage, but also through the conferences of various political parties that have incorporated Kathakali performances into their own programs.
We see now cultural programs being offered to the whole of society and not just to a section. In the feudal period prior to the land reforms, when Kathakali was within the safe-keeping of the Namboothiri, the local populace, under the tolerance and generosity of patrons, viewed such performances from areas which were peripheral to the central spectator spaces occupied by invited and honoured guests. There is a Natyasastra (See Chapter Four) quote that urges that one study the people and then write drama. There are two forces in society, two classes. Predict who will overcome the struggle between two forces and write drama for them. Time moves on and so people’s sensibilities are changing. There is a much greater dissemination of information and of other influences. Kathakali cannot stand back in former times, it must also move forward.

The “Mahabharata” itself deals with two opposing forces in society; it is itself a political epic, as is the “Ramayana” also. The elite circle, the aesthetic fundamentalists, are questioning me on my carrying out political propaganda through my Kathakali plays, insisting that I should only be treating “pure”, “classical” forms. They insist that I am propagandising through a classical art form and spoiling the spirituality and the elite aesthetical sensibility through my work.

I answer them that both the “Mahabharata” and the “Ramayana” are political stories. What I am doing has a political dimension of propaganda, but it also has the educational dimension of popularising the art form.

One thing is really important: I am not changing any structural features of Kathakali. I am only providing a new narrative in my plays, or giving new symbols to old narratives: new mudras such as “bombs, new bhavam, new styles of kalasham, new rhythms to accommodate the notions of modern warfare, and so on. But these are not structural changes, only modifications within the existing structure, otherwise, Kathakali will not exist in the future.

Also in the Kerala Kalamandalam many people have opposed me, saying that I am spoiling Kathakali; and I cannot understand that. There are many changes also in Bharata Natyam, in Kuchipudi and in other forms of dance, because they recognise the need of the times. They cannot ignore the necessity of the times and we cannot.

Moving Kathakali Training into the Times.

Sreedharan brought the necessity of the times to his office as Secretary of the Kerala Kalamandalam, a position from which he resigned in 1991, following the State elections and the consequent change of government. He got mixed reactions from within the Kalamandalam for his initiatives. However, he is credited with having renovated old buildings, among them the kuttampalam, and also the old Kalamandalam, and having set up a new hostel building and new quarters for the teachers. These measures surely had a positive impact: externally by enhancing the public face of the training centre.
and its cultural status and internally by imbuing the training environment with a fresh perception of its possibilities in a changing world. The physical changes heralded aspirations for a cultural shake-up.

When Sreedharan organised the Diamond Jubilee Festival of the Kalamandalam, an eleven-day festival that saw the participation of many visiting groups, he provided a further occasion for the widening of Kathakali’s performance frontiers in terms of the national focus that could be brought to the occasion. It further served as an opportunity to widen the cultural perspective of teachers within the Kalamandalam by showing the possibilities of extending Kathakali beyond its traditional contexts. Since he opened up the Kalamandalam to a concurrent, wider program of secondary education for its trainees, he also relocated their own local perspective of performance in a national perspective with international horizons and possibly provided a forum for diverse voices. This general educational measure, of course, necessitated a reduction of time available for specific performance training and this move was not without criticism. Sreedharan is concerned by the lack of general education in many of the traditional teachers since this has repercussions to Kathakali. The low level of general education of the student performers and of their teachers, in his view, inevitably holds Kathakali back in a “fundamentalist” perception.

Many of our artistes, who are also our teachers, have no primary education. They come to the Kerala Kalamandalam at the age of twelve. They have often not completed primary education to the seventh, fifth or fourth standard. They have no breadth of general knowledge, no real sense of language, of historicity, no views of sociological aspects of development, so that some sort of fundamentalism dominates their minds. Within the Kalamandalam, they very gradually come in contact with other influences, but under very primitive conditions for general education within the Kalamandalam itself.

Now I have started a High School there. So they are mixing. When I was working on the adaptation of “King Lear”, many of them protested that it was a Western story. This is an element of the aesthetic fundamentalism to which I refer.

The lack of literacy and general education amongst the well-established and highly reputable artistes of the Kerala Kalamandalam denies them knowledge of change in the world and of history. Even when they travel around the world with performing troupes, their eyes are closed. I travelled with them two or three times as their manager and troupe leader in ’88, ’89 and ’91, to Europe and Southeast Asia. But whereas I am now engaged in the writing of a
travelogue of my journeys, which is to be published, the artistes just stayed in their hotel rooms. While I went off to visit the Prado, the Louvre, and so on, they did not. They are not interested in finding out how we came here, how we are gathering new information. They just sit in their rooms. They are all artistes, but artistes can gather and absorb so much more information. But they are not inclined to this.

Vallathol (the Founder) was very progressive in his conception of the Kerala Kalamandalam, to save and promote Kerala’s performing arts, but it is the misfortune of the Kalamandalam that the teachers and artistes are very conservative.

The notion of “fundamentalism” is, for Sreedharan, characterised by stagnation, by failure to take up studious habits and by lack of exposure to new ideas.

Fundamentalists do not like to study further. They are not researching. They have settled for some idea that they consider to be “pure” and “final” and “fixed”. They do not want any changes and developments. They want only the status quo. They cling only to this belief, thinking that the beginning of wisdom is the worship of god or hero according to some dogma. But the beginning of wisdom is question and research.

It is in this succinct expression regarding the getting of wisdom that Sreedharan perhaps states the crux of the conservative / progressive dispute that continues within the worlds of Kathakali. Those who would insist upon the essential ties of Kathakali to Puranic literature and the narratives of Hindu epics seem to disallow that wisdom may be generated by questioning and researching.

Through propagation and education we can overcome fundamentalism. But we cannot overcome belief systems, religious systems, caste traditions and so on simply through formal education in a short time.

Since 1950 there have been changes in Kerala, mostly wrought by the political left. In Kerala the right wing is only defending religious fundamentalism and caste-ism. The left wing is propagating secularism. Religious fundamentalism stands only on belief. The situation can be changed through education, through art, through performance. I am always speaking about secularism. My new play is about secularism and raising awareness about issues that attach to notions of nationalism: Kalistan, the Punjab issue, the Kashmir issue, the Assam issue, and so on. Writers and artistes must propagandise for secularism in order to help our country.
What are the “Popular” and the “Political” of Sreedharan?

Sreedharan uses the notion of “popular” in a number of ways. The term assumes different levels of meaning in different contexts. A closer look at some varying definitions of this concept may help to illuminate currents within the “fundamentalism”/ “secularism” dispute outlined by Sreedharan. Particularly in seeing how he appropriates and strategically adapts the “popular” in the dual political/cultural propagation that he sets for himself. I think it is useful to look briefly at the general context of Performance Studies in order to compare notions drawn from there with the use of similar terms in Indian culture and more specifically, by Sreedharan.

Michael Booth, a scholar in the general area of Performance Studies, provides a simple, effective statement of diverse notions of “popular performance” for the purpose of analysis within the context of Western culture. His framework provides a sound basis for comparing Indian culture up to a point. In Booth’s article, “What is Popular Theatre?” (1983), he acknowledges that one general, determining parameter for the notion of “popular” is “the counting of heads” (1983:4). Sreedharan’s plays in Kathakali have surely earned the right to this definition of “popular”, given the huge audiences that his plays have attracted. He assured me that when The People’s Victory opened in the city of Palghat, under the auspices of the Marxist Communist Party, after just a few performances there had been an attendance of over two hundred thousand people. The play was subsequently warmly welcomed in the “Christian Belt” of Kerala where many spectators had not previously witnessed Kathakali. They provided an audience of nearly two thousand people.

Booth (1983:5) goes on to provide for the frankly political within the realm of popular theatre, which he sees as “political theatre, or to be more specific, a left-wing theatre aimed principally at working class audiences”. This reference might well be illustrated by, for example, the theatre of Dario Fo and Franca Rame in Italy, where they took their performances out of the theatres that were traditionally supported by urban, middle class spectators and into the
factories. Fo and Rame refused to have the politics of their theatre disempowered through its appropriation, as “mere” satirical entertainment, by the middle classes. The strongly political and left wing messages of their theatre were aimed predominantly at the working classes. Their theatre proved to be a very powerful political weapon. Booth (1983:5) says:

…I n the eyes of many theatre people and dramatists, the phrase *popular theatre* means only the presentation by popular techniques of political material intended to radicalise working class audiences; any other social groups interested enough to come along either have to lump it, sympathise politely, leave in disgust, or profess class allegiance.

Sreedharan’s theatre, in the context of Kerala, also satisfies this definition of “popular”, when he advocates the use of Kathakali to convey “propaganda for political and social change”. A further affirmation of the effectiveness of Sreedharan’s theatre in radicalising and politicising its spectators is surely to be found in the act of patronage that it has received from, for example, the Marxist Communist Party in Palghat. In Sreedharan’s performances there exists a symbiotic relationship between the political and the popular; each enhances the other in this marriage.

The popularity of his performances is to be gauged in terms that reach beyond the simple commercial expression of numbers in attendance. Certainly the large numbers that fill stadia under the aegis of political parties and cultural groups are significant, but it is the next stage in his quest that marks Sreedharan’s work. He moves on to promulgate his brand of popular performance culture and politics to those in attendance. From the popular he projects the populist.

Booth (1983:5) quickly moves on to more widely engaging factors that he sees as defining to the notion of “popular theatre”:

The experience of popular theatre is a widening experience, not a limiting one … Surely this feeling of breadth, of the extension of experience, of the pushing back of boundaries, is the reason why so many people today are concerned with popular theatre.

Sreedharan’s declared intention to “educate towards the popularising of Kathakali” also falls within this definition of popular. He seeks to create
secular stories that appeal to ever-widening audiences, and he seeks to do so with a clear political end. Moreover, he attempts to instill in those spectators an understanding of the performance structure of Kathakali. His very didactic introduction to the performances that are given before non-traditional spectators is widening their performance competencies. So too is the providing of contemporaneous translations of mudra discourses into the vernacular of the spectators throughout the performances. Sreedharan’s avowed intention is “to push back boundaries” of intelligibility and of empowerment. The boundaries for him relate to the performance conventions of the establishment but they also relate, because of the themes of his work, to the boundaries of communalism and fundamentalism, which are at the base of inter-community strife in India even in the recent times of 1999.

In his quest, Sreedharan takes Kathakali outside the theatre establishment. He does this firstly by writing secular stories that bear no relation to the Puranic origins of “establishment” Kathakali. But he also does so in a second sense, by taking his Kathakali theatre to non-traditional performance spaces. No longer are the performances contextualised in the traditional spaces of village squares, no longer on the occasion of temple festivals. They are removed from geographical and sociological extension of the temple space. Nor are they any longer in the Kathakali clubs of the elitist “appreciators” of the traditional art. His plays are performed in theatres and stadia, under the patronage of secular bodies that may be cultural societies or political parties. The venues and the patronage of these circumstances provide vast, new audiences. Sreedharan says, “We now see cultural programs being offered to the whole of society and not just to a section.”

Booth moves on to consider “popular” in terms of its standing outside the theatre establishment. Booth (1983:10) says:

There is a significant gloss on the word popular which is of vital importance; namely, that every sort of popular theatre or popular entertainment has originated outside the theatre establishment, and many of them outside theatre buildings of any kind.

Sreedharan is also moving Kathakali into the realm of the popular and locating it outside the establishment. He does so by departing from the extended temple
space, the adjacent village square, which serves for village performances and is a space imbued with what I see as “popular” underscored by religion. At the same time, he steps outside the establishment of the elitist aesthetics that characterise the Kathakali clubs. Within these more exclusive spaces, self-definition as “appreciators” generates orthodoxy of the elite. When Sreedharan affirms his intention to “take the structure of Kathakali and mix in contemporary issues and move away from the old Puranic stories” he is transgressing the traditionally held conventions of Kathakali and redefining its symbols in a manner that is decidedly unacceptable to the “fundamentalists”. These anti-elitist and anti-fundamentalist currents in his work provide very decidedly for politics of the popular.

**The Continuing Process of Popularising**

In historical terms, Kathakali had its origins outside the prevailing performance genres of the times, outside Sanskrit Theatre, which in Kerala is exemplified in *Kuttiyattam*, and outside *Krishnattom*, a form of temple performance (See Chapter Four). It was decidedly “popular” in terms of its departure from the “establishment” genre; and it consciously sought a wider audience through the popularising of its own performance conventions. It did this when Malayalam, the local vernacular, was adopted for its sung narratives. Emergent Kathakali challenged the performance hegemony of the era. The degree of its transgression may be measured not only in the radical departure from prevailing performance genres and their conventions, but also in the social impact of its wider inclusiveness towards spectators. It moved performance significantly away from Sanskrit, the language of the Puranas and of the Brahman keepers of all-pervasive ritual, to the vernacular. It “de-mystified” performance and it shifted aesthetics, even if, until its widespread patronage by temple festivals, the “popular” spectators were very peripheral to the performance spaces.
My research shows that there is a fundamentalist expectation of Kathakali that traditional performance conventions relating to make-up, character type and so on, should be rigorously maintained and applied only to stories of Puranic origin. Moreover, I find that this expectation appeals to the authority of aesthetics generated by a Hindu hegemony. However, the arguments put forward by Sreedharan include historical eclecticism in the development of Kathakali, which, inter alia, has seen the incorporation of Muslim elements of costuming. On this basis he strongly rejects the notion that Kathakali can currently be located exclusively within Hindu religious traditions. The current dispute between conservative and progressive currents on issues of aesthetics in Kathakali can be viewed as part of a much longer series of gradual modifications to the genre. This ineluctable process of popularising may account for the survival of performance genres by ensuring their continuing relevance to contemporary society.

**Manipulating the Popular Dimensions of Religious and Mythic Realities**

I have argued (See Chapter Six), that a fundamental spectator competence is the shared mythic truths of humanity. I think that there is a further defining aspect of popular performance that relates to the mythic realities embedded in the perceptions of many of those spectators who frequent temple-festival performances of Kathakali, that is the religious and devotional dimension. For this group of spectators particularly, the mythic fabric of the very familiar Hindu epics provides a collective consciousness. I see them as being primarily Hindu devotees, but clearly not members of the elite appreciators. They constitute a group of popular spectators, characterised by familiar knowledge of Hindu epics, who regularly attend traditional performances of Kathakali in conjunction with temple-festivals. They do not, however, necessarily embrace the articulated conservative politics of “fundamentalism”. Their aesthetics are not intellectualised. These same
spectators, being native to Kerala, can reasonably be expected to have had an adequate general education. Their own very devotional perspectives of the symbols of Kathakali are, of course, embedded in Hindu culture. This factor alone, however, is not, in itself, restrictive to their acceptance of new dynamics.

Hinduism, in its rigid social organisation and its exclusion of “untouchables”, nevertheless seems to comprehend a plethora of very diverse paths to “self-realisation” for devotees. It offers the paradox of rigid hierarchical organisation and exclusion, but at the same time multitudinous paths to achieve one’s devotional ends. Unlike the caste system, Hinduism in its broadest sense seems to be characterised by inclusiveness and fluid boundaries. Within the perspective of the wider Hindu culture that I am outlining here there is scope for fluid boundary experiences and individual perspectives that are of a mythic and religious order. These experiences do not adhere to dogma and they are not consciously political. They are mythic, religious and popular. These same popular mythic dimensions of the wider culture are brought to bear in the microcosm of performance worlds. Performance enhances whatever inter-textual meanings spectators may want to bring to it.

All theatre plays upon ideas of time. Within the performance context, when I refer to “mythic time”, I relate the notion to a disjuncture from chronological time. This may be achieved through elements of the narrative but also by directorial strategies that deliberately interpolate chronological elements or confound the spectators’ mundane organisation of time/space within the performance. “Mythic time”, for me, ushers in a dilation of the moment, a collapsing of lineal organisation or a looping of chronological time. When Sreedharan discusses the Puranic and Vedic stories as “conceptions without time” and as having characters which “live in the minds of the people” he opens up, for me, the discussion of “mythic time”. It becomes a key to understanding a “popular” dimension that is characteristic of traditional, Indian performances: “When Krishna is coming they love to see him; they are all coming”, Sreedharan observes. The cult figure of Krishna provides an
exemplar of the mythic, religious and popular dimensions that may be brought to performance. It also provides an example of an opportunity for the dramaturgical displacement of those religious and mythic dimensions and the supplanting of traditional heroes with political movements.

To pursue this, performance lends itself to the manipulation of these popular mythic realities that spectators may bring to Kathakali. The popular dimension of myth can also be manipulated towards the populist dimension of politics. Sreedharan seeks to plant his own historical heroes in the same matrix of mythic time. He does it very consciously when, in his play, Message of Love, he deliberately interpolates the respective eras of Krishna, Christ, St Thomas and Mohammed, contemporaneously with the political characters collectively embodied in “Revivalists of all Religions” and “Religious Fundamentalism”. He thus blurs not only the boundaries of mythic and historical time but at the same time provides a spill-over of mythic dimensions to the values embodied in his historical figures. He employs a strategy of temporal interpolation that channels his spectators towards mythic time, towards the basic “shared spectator competence” of mythic realities. He facilitates and refines this process by including the very familiar symbols of make-up, costume and character type and re-inscribing them with his own gods and heroes.

The performance strategy of temporally interpolating in order to achieve mythic ground is further elaborated by the inter-laying of contemporary issues with Kathakali structures that are themselves steeped in the traditions of Puranic stories. “I can take the structure of Kathakali and mix in contemporary issues and move away from the old Puranic stories”. The contemporary issues to which he refers are the very themes of his plays, such as “fundamentalism and inter-community strife”. In so doing, Sreedharan has strategically interpolated chronological time to a further degree. He elaborates the mythic nature of performance in a number of ways, such as, the adaptation of traditional make-up categories to his own contemporary characters. These characters themselves take on something of a timeless nature by their collective identities, like characters in an English mediaeval or Renaissance Morality
Play. The interpolation of different characters from different historical periods provides for chronological disjuncture, for me and perhaps for the elite appreciators of Kathakali, but in the very fluid boundary conditions of the mythic realities brought to Kathakali by popular spectators it may register differently.

**Conclusions**

Apart from the evidence of the eclectic development of Kathakali put forward by Sreedharan and others (See Chapter Four), mythic experience, which is common to popular spectators and elitist appreciators alike, may provide for a further justification of his remark that “Kathakali is not (just) a Hindu religious form.” The shared mythic realities of humanity may familiarly include Hinduism, but they also extend beyond it. As we have seen, Sreedharan contextualises this remark by pointing out that *Krishnattom* is stagnated because it is regarded as a religious art form. It has not been eclectic enough. It has not been made progressively relevant to contemporary issues. It has not moved sufficiently out of the inner temple space. It has not encompassed the transgression of sufficient boundaries. It has not been rendered popular.

Sreedharan formulates yet another defining characteristic of “popular”. It is, for him, the co-presence of so many determinants of performance, each of which is drawn from the wider culture, each of which may also represent a focused dimension for appreciators to explore respectively. However, it is the co-presence of performance determinants and not their singular, discrete recognition that characterises “popular” culture. Sreedharan says:

*So many artistic dimensions are found in Kathakali: sculpture, gesture, costume, music, rhythm. Kathakali is a total harmony.*

*The simple popular appreciation of Kathakali encompasses all of these elements as part of familiar, popular culture.*
What emerges from the discussion in Chapter Seven is that not all elitists prioritise one performance code over another in their aesthetics. Many appreciators emphasise the need to have some knowledge of all of the performance determinants and at the same time stress the importance of their co-presence and co-penetration. Sreedharan’s discourse on Kathakali would identify the “fundamentalist” nature of those agendas that seek to prioritise one performance determinant over another, at the expense of losing an appreciation of the totality, the integrality of performance. He characterises the popular through the co-presence of the performance determinants, a fact that is acknowledged by spectators and leads to their greater enrichment. What is clear from my discussion in Chapter Seven is that those elitist appreciators who do acknowledge the importance of co-presence and of co-penetration of performance determinants are making a further acknowledgement. It is that those aspects that characterise elite appreciators also incorporate the basic matrix of what belongs to popular spectators, that is, mythic realities.

Sreedharan exploits this mythic ground in a deliberate strategy to popularise his own secular themes. He embeds his themes in interpolated time and in the re-inscribed symbols of what was formerly associated with Puranic myths; now, by him, appropriated to contemporary secular themes. These secular themes, nonetheless, are also viewed by popular spectators who share common mythic realities, which are here unashamedly and very strategically also exploited by Sreedharan to a political end, which is secularism.

In promoting what he perceives to be the popular understanding and appreciating of Kathakali, he is also strategically and politically manipulating what I regard as the mythic underpinning of popular enjoyment of performance. Sreedharan emphasises that his messages are not only political, but also cultural: the former deriving from the play’s treatment of contemporary issues, the latter from “traditional Kathakali which is in the blood of the people; the popular, lowest level of society”. It is here that the mythic dimension of what is “popular” flows “in the blood of the people”. Sreedharan’s strategies manipulate it to cross-feed from the broadly cultural to the specifically political dimensions of what is popular.
Chapter Nine - Sacralising Kathakali and Tapping into Sorrow

Introduction

The all-pervasiveness of religion and the inter-twinning of the sacred and the secular in epic and Puranic exposition and interpretation are themes explored by Wood, in regard to the imparting of knowledge in India before printing. These traditional narratives have been “a major means of teaching and learning not only morals and religion but also many other areas of knowledge, like the arts of human relations and politics, the astrological and psychological sciences behind ritual and yogic practice, and the fundamental concepts of philosophy”(Wood, 1985: 24). These major epics were interpreted as sacred texts but at the same time they laid out the basic ideals of secular life. In recounting the human lives of Rama and Krishna, two of the incarnations of the god Vishnu, they fuse the sacred and the secular. The respondents to my interviews continue to interpret just such a sacred/secular fusion in the performance exposition of these narratives in Kathakali.

The reciprocal processes of sacralising and secularising influence the traditional aesthetics for Kathakali. Performance spaces for Kathakali are coloured by the respective trappings of both sacrality and secularism (See Chapter Three). Changing patterns of patronage for Kathakali continue to reflect degrees of sacralising or secularising, through the choice of venue for the performances, the spectators involved and the aesthetics that are promoted within the particular performance space. Historical questions regarding kingship and caste have been interpreted and re-interpreted according to perceptions of religion or politics; and we have seen (in Chapter Four) how these factors have influenced the current shape of Kathakali cultures. Traditional, pre-colonial epistemologies in India seem less concerned with distinguishing the secular and the sacred but for the purposes of this analysis an attempt to distinguish their respective influences in the contemporary cultures of Kathakali may be useful.
In his discussion of ethnohistory and kingship in India, Dirks (1993:xxiii) outlines a significant analytical perspective when he underscores the need to recognise the “necessity of contradiction, the relentless transitivity of text and context, of meanings exposed and concealed”. Specifically in regard to his analysis of powers retained by traditional kingship, and the subsequent hollowing of that crown under British colonial rule, he affirms that “politics is neither available as a transparent analytic category nor contained solely within the cultural statements that ground (his) analysis of meaning.” Against this framework of coinciding functions and apparent contradictions, Dirks (1993:106) explores, inter alia, the notions of “service” and “worship” in kingship and sees that they are “indissolubly combined in political relationships”. He sees worship as a “form of transaction and a mode of relationship (that) pervades the political process”.

The caste system was upheld by both legal and religious sanctions in traditional Indian society. Dirks argues (1993:197) that the “concepts of purity and pollution also acted against the development of direct relations between Brahmins and (caste-less members of society) in earlier times”. He further argues that when Dumont maintained that “the political and economic domains of social life are ‘encompassed’ by the ‘religious’” he was only updating the view of India found in Marx and Weber (Dirks, 1993:4). “Dumont holds that temple honours are purely religious, in contrast to kingly honours, which are solely political (Dirks, 1993:286)”.

Stressing the autonomy of temples and temple honours was really a platform of governance promulgated by the British under a colonial policy of divide and rule, whereby they hollowed out the powers of traditional Hindu kingship and elevated the bureaucratic status of Brahmins to their own political ends (Dirks, 1993:359). Promulgation of the purity/pollution principle exclusively under the rationale of religion furthered that colonial ambition and markedly shifted the balance of persuasion between political and religious rhetoric.

Religion, worship and politics continue to be infused in the microcosm of Kathakali cultures. One cannot ignore the historical influences of the traditional rulers and the Brahmins, respectively, through their patronage of Kathakali. Nor
can one ignore the political reactions to those same influences, which mark the spectrum of gradual changes in patronage (See Chapter Three) and the overt, radical attempts at further secularisation that are identifiable in contemporary Kathakali cultures (See Chapter Eight). Changes in aesthetics for Kathakali continue to reflect an admixture of these three elements. Religion, worship and politics variously mark the performance spaces, the venues for Kathakali. However, whether these spaces and their performances are viewed as being tendentiously sacralising or secularising, the inherent political dimension is still constantly at play.

Within the popular response to Kathakali among respondents to my interviews there are spectator voices which indisputably uphold religion and worship as being at the basis of their aesthetics for the performances. The political underpinnings that are traditionally carried along with these perspectives will also have a history, though perhaps not all of them are so immediately identifiable. The performance mirroring of caste relations in society is a more obvious one. The promotional role-modelling of the ideal consort through the social and religious values imparted in performance is another. Some of these respondents attempt to articulate intellectually the relationship that they understand between religion, worship and Kathakali performances. Others seem not to be concerned with the role of intellect in performance reception, and appear overwhelmed by sentiment, sometimes to the degree that they choose not to distinguish between actor and character. In traditional Hindu India, religion and worship are widely contributing factors to the popular nature of performance; and that popular nature is perceived by popular spectators and elitist appreciators alike, regardless of the range of performance competencies that may prevail within individual spectators.

Across the spectrum of elitist appreciators and popular spectators responding to my interviews there was a common emotional response to the performances. Importance was clearly given to the emotion of sorrow in their aesthetics. Respondents made numerous references to the universality of sorrow and to their capacity to identify with the sufferings of characters enacted in Kathakali. The most popular play *Nala Charitam*, the story of King Nala, was
often referred to by elitist appreciators for the challenges that it offers to the
actors and the opportunities that it offers for masterful performances. However,
both groups also cited this play for the opportunities that it offered them to
identify with sorrow. Sorrow is clearly an important emotion in the aesthetics of
Kathakali in Kerala; it provides a link between the mundane and the mythic
realities in performance.

In my discussion of contemplative and devotional aspects of aesthetics, I
make frequent reference to Coomaraswamy’s theorising on traditional Indian
aesthetics. He draws comparisons between older traditional Asian art and the
aesthetics of modern secular art of a more Western tradition. However, I find
amongst the responses to my interviews many comments that seem to affirm the
vestigial presence of what Coomaraswamy discusses as traditional aesthetics.
This evidence occurs among both the popular spectators in the performance
context of temple festivals and the elitist appreciators in the more secular
circumstances of Kathakali clubs.

**Religion, Worship and Contemplation**

The four interviews that follow were conducted (6.12.'92) in a
traditional, rural setting in the district of Palghat, Kerala, at the Shri Krishna
Temple at Kavassery. These respondents, and others, were randomly sought
out, in the late afternoon and early evening, prior to a performance of Kathakali
that was being provided by the temple committee in conjunction with that
temple's festival. The open area that had been designated performance space
had been set up with a traditional canopied stage, constructed of tamped earth
raised about fifteen centimetres high, immediately adjacent to the temple
compound. The interviews were conducted and tape-recorded, in Malayalam,
unless otherwise stated, in my presence, by my research assistant, P.Krishnan
Kutty. This was done according to a flexible format agreed and rehearsed
beforehand. The translations and transcriptions into English were done in the
following days, by Krishnan Kutty, in discussion with me. Only the first of
them is reported here in full to provide also a sense of the format used.

This man has come from Sydney University in Australia to conduct
research into Kathakali. Would you mind us asking you some questions
for that purpose?

When you see such things you can learn a lot.

What is your earliest memory of Kathakali?

This is not the first... I used to go to Guruvayoor and all about. I like all kinds
of festivals in all kinds of places.

Do you attend Kathakali performances frequently?

Yes. I usually come, frequently.

Do you actively search out Kathakali performances?

I usually go to Kudalmanikyam.

What do you like most in Kathakali?

When one speaks about God. There are stories about human beings. There is a
lot to be learned.

What do you get out of it?

Many things about God; images, concepts - Puranic- to learn about it. What we
see is all good. Man (humankind) is the greatest God... mother, father, guru,
God...things like these... about these...There are many things, but that is for the
learned.

Have you got a favourite story or scenes from a story?

There is only good in it. I am not interested in anything bad. For me, this is all
related to God. Whether it be church, mosque or a temple or a temple festival;
they are all appealing to me.

Is there anything that you can't fully understand or enjoy in Kathakali? If
so, what are these?

When we see, we understand many things.

Do you know which stories are being presented this evening?
*Today is the story of Krishna. These all came from Kudalmanikyam. These things are taught there. These are all divine, sacred, about Lord Krishna. God is one.*

Is it of importance to you to know the program beforehand?

*Until morning there will be different stories... Going about one's business, and places... aren't there different things in different temples? But this is a good thing.*

In your opinion, can everyone enjoy Kathakali alike?

*There are all different beliefs, different opinions. Good deeds are done by humankind. Good deeds, that is my interest. Divine matters. Isn't it good to learn? Isn't that why there are temples? That's why the world is made.*

Is there anything that you don't like in Kathakali? If so, why?

*There is nothing I don't like in it. It is all dear to me.*

If you don't mind, I would like to ask you some personal details:

your age?

*I don't know that. God! Could it be thirty? Forty? It might be forty-five.*

Occupation?

*A casual labourer. Poor me!* 

Caste?

*Before God, all men are one... there is nothing like religion and caste... Man (humankind) is one... Regardless of caste, man is one. All that matters is goodness. All castes are one.*

Name?

*Krishnan.*

Krishnan’s responses include specific references to the relationship between being a spectator to performance and enhancing learning and understanding. Temples become defined in terms of their functioning as centres for learning. My attempts to lead this interview to a discussion of those questions that might have provided insight into his performance competencies, or his appreciation of a need for them, were thwarted. He constantly returned the discussion to notions of goodness, humankind, the immanence of god and
Puranic concepts and images. The subject's responses reflect a great appetite for the transcendent values of performance. Coomaraswamy (1977:146) in his essay, “The Intellectual Operation in Indian Art” says:

The man who still worships the Buddhist image in its shrine has in many respects a better understanding of Buddhist art than the man who looks at the same image in a museum, as an object of fine art.

When Coomaraswamy constantly returns to the function of art for contemplative ends he is offering a common matrix of worship to both elitist and popular aesthetical perspectives, such as are being drawn here, in the perception of Kathakali by elitist appreciators or by popular spectators. Both of these groups may be seen as contemplators, within the context of worship. Individual spectators, in whom both intuition and intellect are assumed to be functioning, may still be distinguished as elitist appreciators or popular spectators, in terms of the degree of performance competencies that are rationally applied by them. Nevertheless, the end of devout contemplation and the degrees of transcendence that it may bring to them are not necessarily denied to either group. When local, traditional Hindus watch Kathakali performances, to some degree, religion, worship and contemplation underpin the interpretation of expounded Puranic narratives, regardless of the degree of their performance competencies and their rational application. In the perspective that I am offering here, religion, worship and contemplation enhance performance competencies for the participation of on-lookers; competencies which permeate the perceptions of both the elitist appreciators and the more popular spectators.

Krishnan’s world-view, as presented in this interview, focuses on the universality of immanent godliness in humankind. He affirms his opposition to a world divided by notions of caste, or even by religion as a marker of different communities. “God is one.” His susceptibility to the Puranic stories presented in performance make him subject to the mythic truths expounded therein, but his own interpretation brings them to a universality that extends beyond the traditional communal boundaries of Hinduism. Krishnan sees temples above all in their function as places of teaching and learning and he stresses the
importance of seeing performances in the learning process. Religion, worship and contemplation are the underpinnings of his very intuitive approach to learning. He does not articulate the role of intellect. However, in a holistic perception of the processes engaged in his watching Kathakali, intellect is surely seen also to be brought into play, both in his acquiring greater transcendental knowledge and in the development of further performance competencies.

If indeed this is not the case and intellect is not applied, in terms of Coomaraswamy’s assessment, there is decadence: the decadence of art, which, he argues is “really the decadence of man from intellectual to sentimental interests”. This kind of decadence is likely to occur, he argues, when we allow “the vulgarity of humanism” to arise, through our attempts to explain myth on an historical basis (euhemerism). He sees the rationalisation of religion and the secularisation of art as being inseparably connected. Perhaps we must allow for this possible dimension in our seeking to interpret Krishnan’s responses to Kathakali performances. Without engaging the subject in a self-reflective process of academically articulated analysis, it is difficult to assess to what degree one’s internal processing of art may be influenced by intellect as opposed to sentiment. In order to illustrate further this point of decadence in rationalising religion and sentimentalising art, Coomaraswamy draws a parallel illustration from Christianity. He affirms that “artistic humanisation of the Son of the Mother of God is as much a denial of Christian truth as any form of verbal rationalism or other heretical position” (Coomaraswamy, 1974b: 46-7).

Krishnan’s responses in the interview do not suggest that in seeing godliness universally in humankind he is invoking “the vulgarity of humanism that appears nakedly and unashamedly in all euhemerism”, as envisaged in Coomaraswamy’s perception of the decadence of man in relation to art. Krishnan does state that “Man (humankind) is the greatest God…mother, father, guru, God…” but I read this not in a Christian or humanistic context but rather a Hindu one which allows for the essence of an immanent God to be present in all of creation. Should we interpret Krishnan’s failure to articulate with rationality the role of intellect in his own processes as a measure of
sentimentality? I think not. In relation to his own exposition of the notion of
decadence, Coomaraswamy (1974b: 46-7) says that “in deprecating the
secularisation of art we are not confusing religion with art, but seeking to
understand the content of art at different times with a view to unbiased
judgement.” In this assertion it is difficult not to read the temporal reference as
an historical one. In which case, are we to allow the probability, given
contemporary influences of secularisation, that the subject, Krishnan, is
necessarily less sacral in his approach to art, for he is a creature of this time;
even if his remarks seem to locate him in a less secular one? The
sacralising/secularising dimensions in contemporary society seem make the
issue of distinguishing them secularly, but not sacrally, more complex.

Sacralising Sorrow

In another interview conducted at the same performance space on that
evening, Thailambal, a fifty-two year old Brahmin housewife was a little more
forthcoming on aspects of theatrical competencies. However, she also filtered
performance consciousness through profound religious experience which, for
her, is focused particularly on the god Ayyappa (See Appendix One).

Have you come here to see the Kathakali?
Yes. I have been watching it for about two years.

What is your earliest memory of Kathakali?
I don't remember much.

Do you actively search out Kathakali performances?
There was one when I saw it at Peringulam Temple.

What does an evening of Kathakali give you?
We are given the power to see and understand the divine images. As I have read the “Ramayana” and so on, it is possible to understand it when it is seen in performance.

Have you got a favourite play or scenes from a story?
"Ayyappan Charitam” (The Story of Ayyappa).

What is it about this story that attracts you?
I was once operated on. And at that time Ayyappa became my guardian. Doctors regarded me as a treasure of Ayyappa. I am powerless to repay that … There was only water in my body. They tried unsuccessfully to remove it by syringe. It was like moving in water. They went to a hall and made votive promises to Ayyappa. Muslims prayed in their mosque, Christians prayed in their church. The Hindus prayed to Ayyappa. They said "Ammini, there has been some mistake; you call upon Ayyappa”. Then we all called upon Ayyappa. All of these doctors co-operated. I didn't have to spend a penny. I have nobody. Upon the advice of the Ayyappan Sangham (organisation of Ayyappa devotees), I started anew. That Ayyappa consciousness never leaves me. Since then I usually go to temples and to Guruvayoor. After bathing in the (temple) pond, I perform "sayana pradakshinam" (the devotional rolling around the shrine). I go there every month.

I don't know that much about it.

Do you know which stories are being presented this evening?
"Santhana Gopalam”; and the sufferings in it...

Is it of importance to you to know this beforehand?
I can only understand by seeing how they treat it.

Will you watch the whole night's performance regardless of the story?
Yes. I will go back at six o'clock tomorrow morning.

In your opinion, can everyone enjoy Kathakali alike?
Yes. Everyone in this group here can understand it. (Question repeated) Each one has a different consciousness.

Is there anything that you can't fully understand or enjoy in Kathakali? If so, what are these?
I sometimes can't understand the actions they do with their hands. Then I ask and learn from those sitting nearby.

Does it strike you as being of importance? Are there any elements that particularly attract you? If so, what are these?

No. From the songs and the drum-beat I can intuit the meaning of the hand gestures.

Do you think that you are better able to enjoy it, when you see more and more Kathakali over the years? If so, why is this so?

Yes. As I understand the story I am able to understand what is being shown there.

Is there anything that you don't like in Kathakali? If so, why?

No.

Tapping into sorrow plays an important role in the aesthetics of local onlookers to Kathakali in Kerala. Thailambal provides her own suffering as a context for her Ayyappa worship. Against her own chosen focus, Ayyappa, she provides also for the validity of worship across diverse religious communities and the efficacy of prayer. She builds a context of religion, worship and contemplation as the primary context for her interpreting Kathakali performances. However, she incorporates in her remarks several references to specific performance competencies, the intellectual ones of Puranic literacy and narrative detail as a key to understanding. She also provides an intuitive link between familiar musical rhythms and her interpreting of the gesture language of mudra in performance. The fact that she, and not Krishnan, has articulated these processes in these clear terms does not necessarily indicate that they are not similarly at play in both subjects. Although Thailambal does refer to both the processes of intellect and also of intuition they are incidental and, I would suggest, co- incidental to her transcendental experience, which is of major significance: “We are given the power to see and understand the divine images.”

Sitting nearby, waiting for the same performance was K.V. Raja Lakshmi, a sixty-six year old housewife of the Sudra caste. She, too, was highly focused on the devotional and Puranic aspects of Kathakali but her comments
also included references to theatrical competencies and the instructional nature of performance. In her interview she had this to say:

The first plays I saw were "Duryodhana Vada" and "Daksha Yaga"... (in which) Parvathi came to Daksha's yaga against the wishes of Siva. Ignoring her arrival her father asked her to leave. "Get out of this yaga sala (sacrificial hall)" he said...

At the time, I was fourteen years old. That is about fifty years ago... I come here every year. My husband was working in Andhra Pradesh. He died twenty three years ago. For the past twenty years I have been watching Kathakali regularly... I don't go far in search of it. I come here because my house is nearby... It is the sorrows and the characters that attract us to the story...(My favourite plays are) "Yuvaraja Abishekam" (The Crowning of Prince Sri Rama, the son of Dasaradha), "Santhana Gopalam"(The story of Santhana), "Puthrakameshti" (The sacrifice performed to obtain male off-spring).

(This is because) ... When divine events arise in the story and coincide with the current situation and sorrows in one's life they attract us more. (My favourite characters are) … Arjuna, Shri Krishna and Bhima. (Because)… Arjuna is the greatest warrior. His guru, Dronacharya, said that in any war he alone would do. He is powerful enough to destroy the entire Kuru clan. And Sri Krishna helps him out. Parthasaradhi (Krishna as charioteer to Arjuna) is a concept that incorporates both. I love and respect them both...

K.V. Raja Lakshmi elaborates the importance of the emotional link of sorrow to her aesthetics and also the divine aspect of the narratives that convey that sorrow. She articulates the coincidence of the divine and the mundane life of humanity through the emotion of sorrow. She unabashedly describes her devotion to the popular cult figure of Krishna as an aspect of her inter-textual referencing for Kathakali performances.

(Tonight they are presenting)..."Kuchela Vritta" and "Raja Suya"... When they (temple festival organisers) come around to collect contributions they distribute printed notices (the program of events). And from that we learn what the stories are to be...I will stay up until morning; and only at six will I leave... There are some who will sleep. But the educated ones like us who have read Sanskrit, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Uttara Ramayana, are very much interested in Kathakali.

She acknowledges the importance of knowledge of the epic narratives to an understanding of Kathakali but goes a step further when she relates her own readings to a knowledge of Sanskrit. In so doing, she opens up the importance of subtle performance relationships between the opening slokas (couplets) in Kathakali with their subsequent elaboration in sung Malayalam and in mudra and in fully understanding the Sanskritised notions that occur within Malayalam. Perhaps, for her, a further significance of knowing Sanskrit, the
classical language of the religious texts and of the Brahmin curators of ritual is that it imbues the performance with an additional cachet of devotion.

Otherwise would these old people come to see Kathakali? No. It is the interest in it from reading the books: the stories are the same as those from devotional literature. We know the songs and acting corresponding to it. We know who the characters are, what the scenes are and what they are singing...Nothing at all (that cannot be understood). We can understand the songs and acting corresponding to the story...Yes; (you are better able to enjoy it when you see more and more Kathakali over the years). Doesn't the distraction from worldly matters (virakti) increase, as one grows older? When one is younger one has to attend to family matters... (There is) nothing at all (that I don't like in Kathakali).

A common dimension to the respective interviews of both Thailambal and Raja Lakshmi is the reference to the attraction of sorrowful events in the narration of the divine, which then find a counterpart in the mundane lives of humanity. These commonalities provide, in performance terms, for a copenetration of mythic and chronological time and also for a divine identity to universal suffering. The narrated elements of suffering, in performance, open up a mythic reality for the universal sorrows of mundane life. In the instances of these interviews the mythic reality is clearly contextualised in religion and the Puranic literature.

Krishna Kumar, a twenty-seven year-old, unemployed member of the Nair caste, who was interviewed at the same performance space, responded to the question regarding the choice of and reasons for a favourite character with a reference to Nala90 in "Nala Charitam" (The Story of Nala). This character and this story are the ones most frequently designated by the elitist appreciators of Kathakali, as the most challenging of roles for a Kathakali actor and the most appealing for an appreciator of Kathakali. This character, Nala, and his story also have enormous popular appeal, which in interviews is very often linked by the respondents to the narrated theme of great sorrow. When this particular interviewee identifies the role of Nala, he still expressly associates the role with the ordeals of sorrow and of transformation, both of which provide for links to mythic reality and the sacralising of performance:

It is the role of Bahuka (the transformed Nala)... That character, more than any other, projects concentration of mind. That is, the role of Nala in a sad state... The separation from Damayanti, going into the forest... then till he goes to Rithuparna's palace...then his work in the palace.
Here again, I see in the responses of onlookers to the enactment of sorrow a mythic link between the mundane and the divine in Kathakali performance. Their responses universalise sorrow. The identification of spectator sorrow with the recounting in performance of heroic suffering provides for a universal sorrow that links humanity and the divine. The mythic reality that is opened up is a sacralising event. It provides for a space beyond the mundane reality. In the instance of these Puranic narratives being enacted in Kathakali mythic reality is inscribed also with themes drawn from religious epics. Sorrow, myth and Kathakali co-penetrate and sacralise the performance for some spectators.

**Performance Competence and Sacrality.**

On a different occasion (12.12.'92), at the Mangod Kathakali Club, M.V. Radakrishnan, a twenty-seven year old teacher and a member of the Warier caste chose to respond to his interview in English. He was very articulate about the competencies required for elitist appreciators of Kathakali and disassociated himself from its popular spectators, whom he saw as having, in order to support their attendance at Kathakali performances, only a notion of sacrality and a general understanding of Hindu mythology and Puranic literature. However, he clearly indicated that a general knowledge of the stories was insufficient to support elitist appreciation. What was required, he maintained, was detailed knowledge.

What is your perception of the people who go to temple performances and their relationship to Kathakali?

*Most of them are going as this sacred ceremony and this sacred art also - on that basis they are going and they know Hindu mythology and the Puranas. This way they can understand. They can follow part of the story. That is why they are going. Common people don't know all of these stories in detail. To appreciate the art fully, one must know all of the details of the stories. The common people cannot follow all of these things in detail.*
This respondent, a self-defined appreciator of Kathakali, chooses "Nala Charitam" as the most engaging of plays, and like the previous subject at the temple performance space, he refers particularly to the sufferings and adversities that are unfolded in that story:

_All Kathakali stories are equal, but I think "Nala Charitam", which is performed over four evenings, is my preferred play...There are emotional scenes there that is very close to our life, that is very much interested/invested in "Nala Charitam. By "close to our life" I mean that there are sorrows and miseries and these evils, etc., in our life and that is contained in all of these four stories._

M.V.Radhakrishnan here considers himself to be an elitist appreciator rather than a popular spectator of Kathakali. However, when it comes to expressing his preference for Nala’s Story, he does so not on the basis of the level of challenge that it offers to virtuoso performers, a fact often referred to by elitist appreciators. Instead, he too expresses his preference for Nala’s Story for the narrative details of sorrow that it offers. His engagement with the performance of this narrative is once more with the theme of universal sorrow, with the mythic reality, with what I see as a sacralising dimension of performance. He affirms that a better understanding of narrative detail leads to a better appreciation of performance, but he does not at this point acknowledge that Kathakali performance itself can, by way of instruction, provide an enhanced appreciation of narrative detail to the willing and observant spectator.

At the festival performance at Perumangod Vishnu Temple (17.12.'92) at Perangod, Ambili, a nineteen year old female student of dance and a member of the Nair caste made similar choices and for similar reasons. Ambili is the daughter of Kottakkal Sivaraman, a Kathakali actor who is renowned for his female roles. She herself has studied Kathakali.

_Generally I like Paccha characters most. All the heroes are Paccha. Among them I like Nala the most... How much that character has endured... how much suffering, happiness. How much he has absorbed. Spectators can watch "Nala Charitam" with more interest than any other. Within only one or two days we can't fully see the stories like "Mahabharata"; and so it is with "Nala Charitam". But we know more about it. So we have a particular liking for it. That's all._
Here we have a similar expression of attraction to the theme of great sorrow, with the underpinning of the need of knowledge of narrative detail of the Puranic literature.

At the same temple performance at Perangod, Syamala Sundaram, a forty-two year old housewife of the Nair caste also expressed the attraction of sorrow and the link it provides between mythic reality and mundane life, through the Puranic stories. She responded as follows:

What does an evening of Kathakali give you?

For us it is like finding a treasure. Even if I am asked if it is the role (vesham) or that character (kathapathram) that fascinates me, I am not in a position to answer... because different characters have different sufferings. Even a character that is happy at times has sufferings in them, don't they? So when we see all of this we begin to feel that we are one of them. A feeling that it relates to our family or something connected to it... I don't know what exactly it is.

Regardless of the performance spaces being characterised by the traditional rural temple festivals or by the elitist environment of Kathakali clubs, the emotion of sorrow elicited by the epic narratives in performance seems to be a common dimension to the aesthetics of popular spectators and elitist appreciators alike.

On that night of 6 December 1992, at the location of the first four interviews reported above, the performance took place in the space immediately adjacent to the village temple at Kavassery. It included scenes from the plays Kuchela Vritta (Scenes 2 & 3) and Rajasuya (Scenes 5, 6 & 7). Both of these plays recount episodes from the life of Shri Krishna and on that ground alone have great popular appeal. Scene 3 of Kuchela Vritta provided a noteworthy moment of performance when Krishna and Kuchela were re-united. When Kuchela arrives at the gates of the city of Dwaraka, Krishna leaves the side of his consort Rugmini to rush forward and greet his old friend whom he has spotted from a distance. He goes to the gate and prostrates himself at the feet of Kuchela before embracing him and taking him off to the royal palace to do him great honour.

On that occasion, the actor Nanda Kumaran, K.M., who was playing the role of Kuchela, contrived his arrival at the gates of Dwaraka from the open
space of the public square behind the last row of spectators seated on the ground. In making his way towards the stage he passed through the cordoned area which was occupied by the female spectators. For his part, the actor playing the role of Krishna left the stage and walked down to meet Kuchela within the women’s precinct. At this point, a number of older women among the spectators, with gestures of supplication and prayer, bowed their heads upon the arrival of Shri Krishna in their midst. For these spectators the sacralising effect of the performance seems to have enabled them to drop momentarily that touch of intellect which would distinguish actor from character. Or has the performance magic brought the requisite combination of dimensions to offer them a moment of transcendence in which the distinction between belief and disbelief, between intellect and sentimentality is no longer an issue of any importance? Have the necessary diagrams for these geometricians of transcendence been put in place by performance?

Coomaraswamy makes the point that in his view of traditional art “function and meaning are inseparable goods”. He regards the traditional artist as “not merely expressing himself, but a thesis”. His arguments sustain the notion that “art is essentially symbolic, and only accidentally illustrative or historical”. Following this line of reasoning, Coomaraswamy concludes that art, even the highest art, “is only a manner of ‘seeing through a glass darkly,’ and that although this is better than not seeing at all, the utility of iconography must come to an end when vision is “face to face”91 (Coomaraswamy, 1974b: 52-3). When the geometry is complete, the diagram is abandoned.

But in the acceptance of this visionary, transcendental state that reaches beyond the iconography, what is the continuing role of intellect, vis à vis intuition? Does the distinction between rational spectator and intuitive devotee have any significance in the transcendental and visionary realm that lies beyond the iconography?

The interplay of intellect and intuition in application to the iconography offered by Kathakali performances surely includes the dimension of intertextual referencing to other performance diagrams that support and sustain
transcendence. I have traced out elsewhere (See Chapter Four) the links between those performance genres that I see as being contiguous to Kathakali, among them the traditional ritual performances of Teyyam. In the Teyyam actor’s preparation for his transformation from man to god the temple congregation shares the ritual. Kavalam Narayan Panikkar likens the belief of participant devotees in the character impersonated to the belief of spectators in dramatic performance. “The devotee is faithful to the deity as the spectator in a theatrical performance is to the performance. It is only at the point where the spectator applies the touch of his intellect that he differs from a devotee” (Panikkar, 1991:31-2). I have also suggested that there is a dimension of transference from contiguous ritual performance genres to Kathakali, in the inter-textual readings by spectators of polyvalent symbols in performance. That spectators may have the intellectual capacity to engage their disbelief is not an assurance that they will chose to do so while in pursuit of transcendent religious experiences in Kathakali performances. Thailambal, in her interview responses reported above, assures us that in Kathakali performances “we are given the power to see and understand the divine images”. Is this, then, the point, described by Coomaraswamy, of being “face to face” with the vision and beyond the utility of iconography? In which case, having served to reach this point, in holistic interplay with intuition, is intellect now to be subordinated to the intuitive, to the imaginative processes?

It seems to me that Syamala Sundaram, the woman who was interviewed (17.12.’92) at Perangod, and quoted above, is affirming the abandonment of intellectual discernment and critical judgement when she states that “Generally there is nothing to be disliked in Kathakali. As we worship Kathakali, there is nothing in it that we dislike.” I have asserted that popular performance is characterised by the blurring of boundaries within the internal processes of spectators, and it seems that such a boundary is blurred or removed when the stroke of intellect is willingly withheld or subordinated to the intuitive. The same respondent’s comment on the representation of suffering in Kathakali seems to extend to the intuitive when she speaks of experiencing “A feeling that it relates to our family or something connected to it… I don't know what exactly it is”.

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The performance space sponsored by the Palakkad Kathakali Club is another setting for elitist appreciators. There I interviewed (20.12.’92), C. Balakrishnan, a sixty-nine year old, retired, chartered accountant, formerly in the Public Service, and a member of the Nair caste, who chose to give his interview in English. He described himself as follows:

Malayalee with fifty years service in Delhi, and so on, returned to Kerala specifically for the Kathakali season. (One who) corresponds with all of the artistes, has compiled a list of all the performances of major artistes for the season between September and May. Expects to stay until the end of the season.

Coomaraswamy (1997: 95) in his essay, “The Part of Art in Indian Life”, emphasises that the acquiring of spectator competence and of connoisseurship is not something that can be imparted in the classroom. Rather, like the skills of the artist, spectator competence must be worked on: “Connoisseurship rightly understood can be achieved only by the rectification of the whole personality, not by the mere study or collecting of works of art”. C. Balakrishnan’s responses in the interview seem to reflect him as living out the rectification of personality in order that he might better appreciate performance; and he seems also to match well many of the spectator competencies that are detailed by the Natayasastra (See Chapter Four).

(In recalling his earliest memories of Kathakali he goes on to say)... I remember the performance of the great Kunju Kurup in the late nineteen thirties, when I was seventeen or eighteen. My parents were very strict. They were great fans of Kathakali, but they didn't want their son to lose the distinction between Raman Kutty Nair (the actor) and his Arjuna... I used to be told “Raman Kutty Nair is not Arjuna”...I have always been interested in or impressed by the Puranic stories. Kathakali does not provide a language that can be used to write any story.

The importance of rectifying the whole personality as a factor in the development of connoisseurship comes quickly to the surface in his responses. In articulating his ideas on what it is that he gets from an evening of Kathakali and what are those features of it that he dislikes, he takes up a discussion of ritual aspects of the performance process, regarding both actors and himself, as spectator:

(In earlier times,) you know one would not enter the Green Room with footwear on. One would not go in and smoke. Nowadays, after having made up artistes are sitting and smoking. I personally used to fast in preparation for an evening of Kathakali.
A ritual dimension?

*Yes, for me a ritual.*

An attempt to change your awareness, your consciousness?

*Yes, that's right.*

(Repeated the question regarding the most important features that the subject got from an evening of Kathakali.)

*It is my own understanding of the Puranic characters and appreciation of their feelings and situations. How effectively its purity ...*(Sentence trailed off at this point).

In the same performance space of the Palakkad Kathakali Club (20.12.'92), I interviewed Munthara, a forty-seven year old accountant of the Nair caste who was then employed in Dubai as an immigrant worker. In this club context he can be regarded as an elitist appreciator of Kathakali. He, too, chose to give his interview in English and, in response to the questions regarding his favourite play and the reasons for his choice, and then his favourite characters, he had the following to say:

*One of the older stories, "Kuchela Vadham" and also "Santhana Gopalam" and in third place I can give you "Nala Charitam", today's play. In "Kuchela Vadham" and "Santhana Gopalam" I am attracted because it is a "bhakti" that I have committed. The motivation is "bhakti"...In "Kuchela Vadham" I've got Lord Krishna and Kuchela Brahmin, two characters that I have liked since childhood. (Your choice is driven by "bhakti"?) Yes, "bhakti". I do underline this word; "bhakti" is first for me.*

Munthara is quite analytical and articulate about his own responses to Kathakali. Intellect is clearly being applied to his analysis; and through that intellectual process he affirms that it is bhakti that primarily motivates his involvement with Kathakali. His imaging of Kathakali is devotional and contemplative. Coomaraswamy (“The nature of Buddhist Art” [ed. Lipsey], 1977:164) points out that in traditional practice art is not a secular activity, as it is for us in contemporary society. “It is not only the first images that are formally of superhuman origin. No distinction can be drawn between art and contemplation”. Although Coomaraswamy’s theorising relates to the traditional perspective that he sometimes contrasts to the more secular and more Western approaches to aesthetics, it remains, at least vestigially, relevant to the kinds of devotional attitudes that are brought by people such as Munthara to Kathakali. Regardless of the more secular dimensions that may contextualise performances...
within the elitist ambience of Kathakali clubs, elitist appreciators of Kathakali may still bring a very traditional, contemplative dimension to the aesthetics of Kathakali. It is within such a contemplative dimension that Coomaraswamy’s theorising on traditional aesthetics remains relevant and valid in its observation that “No distinction can be drawn between art and contemplation”. Traditional aesthetics, despite the inter-laying of secular dimensions, may well survive in the attitudes brought to Kathakali by devotees. Munthara’s very articulate responses seem to indicate that such traditional aesthetics are sustained also by an awareness that is supported by the intellect.

All of the above respondents have specifically referred to the importance of devotion or transcendence or transformation as a key to their particular perception of the religious images enacted in Kathakali. Or else they have implicitly alluded to these factors as a key to their particular perceptions of performance. All bring to the performance an awareness of the impact that the gods or the Puranic literature or the universality of human sorrow has upon their reception of the performance.

Conclusions

I have used Coomaraswamy’s ideas on the traditional approaches to utilising works of art for contemplative purposes as a means to gauge the processes described by respondents in their own interaction with Kathakali. Many of the observations made by the respondents confirm the function of myth, religion and devotion as the principal framing to their reception processes in traditional performances. In some cases they have emphasised the bakhti attitude that they bring to performance, in others they have sought to express the universality of sorrow as a mythic link between the mundane and divine worlds that is elaborated through performance. The aesthetics that they bring to Kathakali is characterised by contemplative and devotional aspects.
These same respondents often depend upon the narrated details of the Puranic literature, enacted in performance, to engage with mythic realities. Very often the thematic link with the Puranic sources is the universal experience of sorrow in humankind. Regardless of whether the respondents become aligned with popular spectators or elitist appreciators, they show themselves to be susceptible to the sacralising of moments of performance through this close relationship with Puranic narratives and mythic truths.

Some respondents are more articulate and forthcoming in their analysis of the ways in which they interact with Kathakali and they clearly apply their intellects in those analyses. Others respond more emotionally, allowing sentiment to over-ride intellect. Regardless of the display of intellect and rationality or of sentiment, within the reception processes of an individual, both intellect and intuition interplay. Coomaraswamy has been quite clear in emphasising the need for the engagement of intellect in his account of traditional aesthetics. But he is equally emphatic about the need for our holistic engagement with art and the utility of it in attracting us to something other than itself. Herein lie the contemplative aspect of one’s engagement with art and also the sacrality of it.

In my analysis of these respondents in terms of Coomaraswamy’s work, the apparent difficulty is the academic need to resort constantly to rigorous distinction: to distinguish rationality from intuition, intellect from sentiment, and so on. Because at the crux of Coomaraswamy’s thinking there lies a metaphysics of non-duality. “His is the perfection of aesthetic contemplation who as ‘very Self’ surveys the variegated world-picture as nothing other than the Self depicted on the mighty canvas of the Self, and takes a great delight therein…” (Coomaraswamy, “The Part of Art in Indian Life” [ed. Lipsey], 1977:93).

Coomaraswamy, in his essay “The Part of Art in Indian Life”, affirms the “imaginative integration of one’s self” with the theme of a work of art, maintaining that the spectator “may not attain the vision of beauty without respect to the theme”. But the sympathy that he upholds here is an ideal
sympathy and a “consent to the passions animated in the theme”. Coomaraswamy (1977:93) in his essay, “The Part of Art in Indian Life”, says:

Just as the concept of the artist is most perfectly and only perfectly realised in the person of the Divine Architect, so the concept of the spectator is most perfectly and only perfectly realised in the Self, one Person, single Self, who at one and the same time and forever sees all things, seeing without duality, verily seeing though he does not look, and whose intrinsic aspect is the single image of all things

The complexity of non-dualistic metaphysics ideally dissolves within the contemplative and meditative processes. The kind of identity that is to be had in Self-realisation is achievable in that transcendental condition whereby the spectator and the art, the single Self and the divine creation are as one. Boundaries are readily dissolved in such transcendence. Popular performance, and particularly Kathakali, facilitates the dissolving of boundaries in the internal processes.
Chapter Ten - Discourses on Performance Competence

The true spectator becomes possessed of the states represented in the play. Normally the young people are pleased with love, the old with Puranic legends and tales of virtue, the learned with religious or philosophic instruction, seekers of money with topics of wealth, the brave with the Heroic, the Furious and the personal combats and fights and the passionless with salvation. The children, the women, and the uncultured are pleased with the laughter and the costume. 


Introduction

Kathakali offers such a rich array of stimuli: bizarre and grotesque make-up and costuming, highly energetic action, subtle discourses of character, ethics and metaphysics, the re-telling of epic narratives, the unfolding of local cultural mores, the re-affirmation of Hindu culture, smatterings of classical literature in the resonance of Sanskrit *slokas*, singing that is imbued with the symbiotic and derivative traditions of other local performance genres, story telling by song, dance, acting and mudra gesture, of stories that are seemingly timeless in their re-telling and always pertinent in their fresh unfolding. Then too, there is the rhythmic and cyclical inter-relationship of all of these, according to the specific conventions of Kathakali’s performance structures\(^96\), which systemically integrates them. Kathakali provides all of these for individual tastes; and also sets up the physical and social circumstances for renewed community bonding through participation in the night-long performance processes.

In the excerpt heading this chapter, Tarlekar’s rendering of the *Natyaśastra* adopts a thematic approach to describing the appeal of performances to spectators. The categorising of spectators into cultured and uncultured occurs only when he labels the “uncultured”, along with women and children, as those who are content to be pleased by laughter and costume. In this view of the performance world outlined by the *Natyaśastra*, the elite of
“cultured” spectators presumably consisted then of mature males who were not readily swayed by extravagant spectacle or humour. This view seems well disposed to allow, in a crude division of spectators, that all other aspects of performance, other than the spectacular determinant of costume and the spectator response of laughter, might conceivably be appropriated by the elite. This reading of the Natyasastra goes on to allow, however, that “smile and laughter according to propriety, and swelling uproar at times” (Tarlekar, 1991:213) manifested the spectators’ approval and appreciation of successful performance. The expression of laughter was well in evidence, but it was apparently not regarded as a characteristic of the elite. Can one presume that the elite allowed themselves to smile and laugh with propriety, but that this behaviour was not an index to the level of their culture? In which case, elitist spectators also subsumed aspects of the more popular responses to performance.

The aesthetics that currently characterise elitist appreciators of Kathakali may have shared aspects with the aesthetics of popular spectators; however, the processes of hegemonising particular performance competencies may well distinguish the aesthetics of the elitists from those of the popular spectators. Across a spectrum of cultures that inhabit the contemporary worlds of Kathakali there are clearly differently ordained aesthetics brought to bear on performances. The hegemony that dominates them carries its own politics. In regard to those onlookers who currently participate in Kathakali performances, I find that the thematic approach of the Natyasastra to reception processes recounted by Tarlekar is inadequate to the task of categorising elitist and popular groups. The gloss adopted by Tarlekar does not allow that those spectators who engage the more popular and spectacular aspects of Kathakali, be it through the extravagant costumes and make-up or the energetic actions of the actors, may indeed be cultured. Although their familiarity may be with performance determinants that differ from those fore-grounded by the orthodox aesthetics of the appreciators, there nevertheless remains familiarity and culture competence of some kind. Their culture is different. Their aesthetics is different. However, popular culture is not to be dismissed. If laughter is an index to popular culture, then it is surely subsumed also into elitist culture, for this latter group cannot in the interest of a more refined aesthetic suppress their
spontaneous, and perhaps universal, responses to performance. It is the manner in which competencies are differently hegemonised that characterises different aesthetics. This range of cultural competencies extending across popular spectators and elitist appreciators cuts across the thematic categories suggested by Tarlekar’s reading of the *Natyasastra*.

Bourdieu (1984:66) describes the development of competence through the process of familiarisation:

> The competence of the “connoisseur”, an unconscious mastery of the instruments of appropriation which derives from slow familiarisation and is the basis of familiarity with works, is an “art”, a practical mastery which, like an art of thinking or an art of living, cannot be transmitted solely by precept or prescription. Learning it presupposes the equivalent of the prolonged contact between disciple and master in a traditional education, i.e., repeated contact with the cultural works and cultured people.

In discussing how a work of art might be “read”, Bourdieu uses a framework of *pedants/mondains*, within which precept and prescription are consciously adopted as a means to instruct the “pedant”, while the “mondain” acquires cultural competence through a more unconscious process of familiarity with the art. However, regardless of pedant/mondain development, only those who have achieved a level of cultural competence, that is, in the determinants in which the art is encoded, can find meaning and interest in the work.

If I take up this model to consider the onlookers to Kathakali, then, I think, and the respondents to my interviews tend to confirm this, that the very integrality of Kathakali enables popular spectators to undergo a process of familiarisation which includes their further instruction in performance determinants. Familiarity may be developed by interested observation, particularly in the company of like-minded observers, but it is also enhanced in Kathakali by the instructional processes within the performance itself, such as, for example, the translational dimension that operates between sung Malayalam and mudra exposition of the narratives. The observing of Kathakali with curiosity and interest by popular spectators can lead, through familiarisation, to their gradual transition to becoming elitist appreciators; particularly when they find themselves in the company of like minds who are more familiar and more cultured. I think this long process of familiarisation by exposure to highly
integrated performance determinants of Kathakali may well belong to Bourdieu’s category of “mondain” development, which designates a kind of connoisseur.

On the other hand, the attempts by Kathakali clubs to instruct their elitist membership in the appreciation of mudra by way of simultaneous translation seems to fit Bourdieu’s classification of “pedant” development. I see it as a process that ruptures and distorts the integrality of Kathakali performances. I do not want to suggest that Kathakali club members are dependent upon this instructional device alone for their appreciation of performances. On the contrary, they will surely have acquired already a high level of competence through more “mondain” means. However, as soon as the mudra translator is introduced to the performance, the integrality of Kathakali is distorted, the hegemony of the word is reaffirmed and the more popular, spectacular determinants of performance are subordinated, if not diminished. This process is also political.

Unlike Tarlekar’s reading of the Natyasastra, I prefer to approach the task of describing the spectators/appreciators, not from their thematic identification but from their particular perspectives of performance competence. Popular culture embraces the attraction of extravagant spectacle, whereas the elitist orthodoxy of Kathakali is disposed to subordinating the determinants of action and spectacle to other determinants, determinants of the word. In the hegemony that results, the word reigns supreme and the determinant of mudra gestures is most highly regarded in its explication. Hence the practice of many Kathakali clubs providing from the “wings” of their performance spaces a simultaneous translation of mudra when, in improvised passages, it is unaccompanied by song. Mudra, the most hermetic determinant of Kathakali performance becomes singled out for articulation and explication and this, I argue, represents a distortion of the integrality of the diverse determinants of performance in Kathakali. Whereas, when this agenda is not imposed, the boundaries that might exist between varying levels of competence between groups of spectator/appreciators is not so clearly marked. They all draw, in those
circumstances, variously upon the multifarious and integrated performance determinants. It is the imposing of the agenda and its hegemony that has so markedly distinguished the desired elite from the rest. Membership of this defined elite also carries its own politics.

**Integrality in Kathakali.**

Amongst other things, the thematic categorising of spectatorship drawn from the *Natyasastra* by Tarlekar seems to retain something of the notion of integrality of performance in as much as it does not attempt to rank the desirability or acceptability of spectators choosing one theme over another. I think Kathakali spectatorship is viewed in a similar manner when it is expressed in a banqueting metaphor proffered by the Kathakali actor, S.Naripata Namboodiri. When commenting on the interface between the popular and the elite within the worlds of Kathakali, he remarked: “Kathakali is like a vast banquet that offers many dishes and not all of them can be taken by everyone.” Such a remark allows for varying degrees of familiarity with diverse performance determinants without hegemonising a particular aspect. The integrality of the performance determinants remains intact within this metaphor. Contrary to the integrality of the imagery expressed by Namboodiry, it is common practice in the elitist environment of Kathakali clubs to extrapolate when they provide for a parallel a translation of mudra into Malayalam. The integrality is distorted or fragmented when one determinant, in this instance mudra, is extrapolated from integral performance and ranked above others for the attention and instruction of elitist appreciators.

Kathakali in performance provides its own level of cross-determinant translations, without extrapolation: opening slokas in Sanskrit, a language which in popular terms remains decidedly hermetic, become elaborated in two other performance determinants, song and mudra. The brief word in Sanskrit becomes expounded and explicated by way of the sung narratives in the vernacular, Malayalam, which in turn are, for much of the performance, provided with
translations into mudra. The conventionalised rhythms of Kathakali and the structurally determined spaces for improvised acting and mudra, without the accompaniment of sung Malayalam, themselves provide systemically for cohesion of performance. It is this cohesion of performance, I suggest, that enables and enhances coherence of meaning derived from the respective integrated structural sub-units and performance determinants, particularly when the space for improvisation in mudra is opened up.

Closely tied to the integrality of Kathakali is what I term the aesthetic notion of inter-penetration of the diverse performance determinants. This notion seems to have been raised by various respondents, but most explicitly by Madhavan Kutty in his neologism “Kathakalic” (See Chapter Seven). I use the term “inter-penetration of determinants” to explain those aesthetical high points in the performance that I attribute to moments of rhythmic and cyclical conjunction of diverse structural sub-units and determinants of performance and which for appreciators of Kathakali often remain ineffable. The cohesion of the multifarious performance determinants is not, however, restricted to theatre of the word. It is also elaborated and enhanced by the intermeshing of dimensions of great spectacle and action and controlled but sometimes explosive bursts of energy throughout the performances. The word, whether in Sanskrit or Malayalam or mudra, is in Kathakali accompanied by the popular appeal of familiar, traditional rhythms of dance and music and bizarre costuming and grotesque make-up, all rigidly conventionalised and categorised, along with eye-movements, facial expressions and energic responses from the actors. The aesthetics of determinant inter-penetration and integrality seem to be the aspiration of those Kathakali connoisseurs who have had what Bourdieu has referred to as a “mondain” development, those who are most cultured through familiarity. Excerpts from interviews that follow here, I think, support this view.

Distinguishing Performance Competencies for Kathakali:
In your opinion can everyone enjoy Kathakali alike?

The range of responses to the question posed above emphasizes the interaction of numerous factors in determining for an individual just what the prerequisite spectator competencies may be, in order to access, enjoy and/or appreciate a performance of Kathakali. The remarks of elitists, who see themselves as “appreciators”, regarding those who approach Kathakali from the level of simply “spectators”, are at times disparaging and in other instances acknowledge the instructive processes of the performance, which may enhance the competence of spectator/appreciators. Both mature age and more youthful appreciators make reference to the current youth being disadvantaged in their access to Kathakali because of their acculturation to and over-riding preference for other more accessible forms of performance. A number of the respondents’ comments include some reference to the essential factor of having an understanding of the story in order to access Kathakali performance. Others refine that concept to a particular understanding of its narration through the determinant of mudra. Others counteract this view by their reference to the translational and instructional processes of the songs, which are sung almost entirely in the vernacular, Malayalam, even if sometimes inter-laid with more Sanskritised language. Still others take pains to emphasize the processes of self-instruction, which have their beginnings in the simple competence of watching and paying attention.

The remarks of this last group of respondents are best able to accommodate the somewhat anomalous interest that is manifested by foreigners who are spectators to traditional performances of Kathakali in Kerala. These foreign spectators, who remain on the boundaries of local culture, perhaps have no previous insights to the narrative traditions of the epic literature. Nor may they have any understanding of the sung narratives in Malayalam and assuredly little understanding of the specific connotations, syntax and grammar of the mudra renderings of the story; nevertheless they have often shown an immediate attraction and very sustained interest in the development of the performance. I suggest that this phenomenon of sustained interest shown by
foreigners lends support to the case that I have been making for the universally popular appeal of spectacle and action and the also for the instructive potential of Kathakali that rapidly provides coherence to the performance for interested spectators.

On Just Watching the Spectacle and the Developing of Competence.

Only those who know Kathakali very clearly or deeply can understand Kathakali. There is no sense in just watching Kathakali.
(Jaya Kumar, 16 year old, student, Nair caste, Kallappadi Siva Temple, Keralasseri, 22.12.’92)

Those who know the stories can. I don’t know the stories at all. I just watch.
(Krishnan Kutty, 45 year old, casual labourer, Theeyan caste, Kallappadi Siva Temple, Keralasseri, 22.12.’92)

Only those who are very patient, those who have an interest in Kathakali and those who like chamaran (hairpieces in costuming) can stay on and see it through. Not everyone may like it. Because, nowadays, everyone likes ballet, cinema and so on. One can judge from the audience. Ballet has a greater following than Kathakali. Children’s dancing also pulls a greater audience. If Kathakali is conducted on one stage, ballet on another and dance on yet another; ballet will draw the greatest audience. Dance will be second. Only the knowledgeable, A-class audience will stay for Kathakali. The rest will leave.
(Krishnan, 30 year old cook/agricultural landholder, Embranthiri caste, Perumangod Vishnu Temple, Perangod, 17.12.’92)

No, everyone cannot appreciate Kathakali alike. First there is the real ignorance of the theme of the story. Then, in contrast to the other art forms, Kathakali presents its story through mudras. Only if one understands those mudras ... also when there is no singing, one has to have knowledge of the mudras to understand the dancing. While ever one doesn’t understand the story, it is difficult to appreciate Kathakali. But there are people who watch Kathakali only because of the beauty of Kathakali, that is, the beauty of the costumes. [Temple spectators as appreciators? ] Only fifty to forty percent of them can appreciate Kathakali. The rest of them, didn’t I say - in contrast to the other art forms, Kathakali has an attractiveness, a power to attract. Only that it presents difficulty in its appreciation.
(Mohanan, 22 year old, student, Tharakan caste, Mangod Kathakali Club, 12.12.’92)

This last respondent, Kathakali club member, Mohanan, who clearly sees himself as an appreciator and not simply a spectator of Kathakali, discounts the
informative and instructive nature of spectacle when it is enjoyed with great attention and patience. He also discounts the translational and instructive role of the singing, which is, in the main, in Malayalam, because it is not continuously sustained right throughout the performance. He is ready to attribute the greatest importance to the narration of the story through mudra. He is not alone in this perspective. The very dismissive attitude towards the those performance determinants which are not explicitly linked to an understanding of mudra narration is also expressed, in the account which follows immediately below, by a club member who considers himself amongst the elite of appreciators.

(...) some experience is needed. Everyone may not understand the mudras. It is possible to follow if one knows the story. A common man can understand nothing. [Temple festival spectators?] They are attracted by the drumming and the spectacle of the vesham, character-costuming. It is not that they can follow the story. It is only possible to understand if one has the experience. They may know the full story, but they may not be able to follow every step and every mudra. Only the experienced can understand it. 
(Madhavan, 54 year old, retired teacher, Ayurvedic pharmacist, Mangod Kathakali Club, 12.12.'92)

Madhavan’s assertion that the common people can understand nothing is very quickly modified, from the low estimation of such performance determinants as percussive music, character-costume typing and a general local appreciation of the epic narratives, to a more concessionary position. His condemnation becomes a matter of degree and no longer absolute: the common people may, in fact, have a very great understanding of many dimensions of the performance, but the lack of appreciation of mudra will remain an impediment to appreciation of the integral performance. The acknowledgement of mudra as the key to integral appreciation is common amongst club members. The club agenda often establishes what it is that will define the elitist position of appreciators as opposed to mere spectators.

I cannot say anything about it because the scheduled castes, that is the low castes, don’t know the stories. For them crowned Kathakali characters are only a bigger ghost and a small ghost. 97
[Hindu upbringing?] Those who have read the stories beforehand can understand. Those who have not come and watch whatever it is that is happening on stage.
[Temple festival spectators?] They come to see it whether they understand it or not. If they don’t then they ask those next to them. 
(A.K.Kutty Krishnan, 70 year old, retired serviceman - defence, Thandan caste, Kallappadi Siva Temple, 22.12.'92)
This elderly man, A.K. Kutty Krishnan, makes a very sweeping assessment of the education levels of the lower castes, which seems to ignore the impact of almost universal education and literacy upon the younger generation in Kerala. He seems also to overlook the instructional impact of television and the print media and of the inter-textual factor of common narrative threads to so many of the performance traditions of Kerala. His remarks seem oblivious to the richness of oral culture, which permeates all castes, but particularly those that were historically denied literacy. He concedes that the instructional processes of enquiring and exchanging knowledge are manifestly evident amongst the spectators. However, perhaps because of the more rigid imposition of caste culture and the lower level of access to education and literacy that marked his own generation, he is unable to concede the development of performance competencies in members of lower castes.

The Imperative of Knowing the Story as Key to Developing Competence?

Doesn’t one have more awareness/knowledge? Could one do without it? Shouldn’t one know that this is the story or this is what is going on? Those who already know can enjoy it.
(Kumar, 40 year old timber merchant, Nair caste, Sri Krishna Temple, Kavassery, 6.12.'92.)

Today’s generation does not like Kathakali because they will not understand its story. The hand gestures will be too difficult for them to understand. Those who are in touch with the story, especially and only Hindus - because it is taken from Hindu Puranas - can understand Kathakali.
(Narayana Menon, 54 year old, retired serviceman, Menon/Higher Nair caste, Sri Krishna Temple, 6.12.’92)

Only if one knows something about the stories and has an interest in songs.
(Ravi Verma, 52 year old, school teacher, Verma/Kshatriya caste, Sri Krishna Temple, Kavassery, 6.12.’92)

Everyone cannot appreciate it alike. I believe that without knowing something about the story, one cannot understand anything. Then, may be, through the action one might know what is going on, but not fully.
(Gopinath, 23 year old, school teacher, Verma/Kshatriya caste, Sri Krishna Temple, Kavassery, 6.2.’92)
While many respondents are quick to concede the need for an understanding of the story in order to become an appreciator of Kathakali, many of them are content to make the observation without exploring the means by which one develops an understanding or a mastery of the story. The avenues for acquiring this knowledge are diverse and readily available to the current generation in Kerala. Universal education and literacy, the mass media, particularly television, the oral traditions of the culture, the inter-textual commonalities of the contiguous performance traditions of the culture, and the interaction of spectators among themselves with enquiry and information are all conducive to a detailed understanding of the stories.

The inter-relations of the performance determinants also contribute to an understanding of narrative. Yet some of the elitist appreciators persist in lauding an understanding of mudra above all other determinants. Some place an emphasis on literacy skills, implicitly degrading the local oral traditions; and one goes even further to stress the importance of literacy in Sanskrit; even though its proportional contribution to a Kathakali performance remains small. The opening slokas in Sanskrit are concise, pithy and are subsequently elaborated in Malayalam, in song, even if, at times, the Malayalam is Sanskritised to some degree. Sanskrit, however, never remains the key determinant of performance to offer insight into the unfolding of narrative.

The opening remarks of K.V. Raja Lakshmi, which are reported immediately below, focus on the elitist status that is acquired through an education in classical literature rather than general literacy. The socio-cultural status of the Sudra caste, historically, the lowest ranking of the four broad categories of Hindu castes and the one to which she belongs, was undoubtedly more rigidly defined in the formative years of her own generation.

There are some who sleep. But the educated ones, like us who have read Sanskrit, the “Ramayana”, the “Mahabharata”, the “Uthara Ramayana” are very much interested in Kathakali. Otherwise, would these old people come to see Kathakali? No. It is the interest in it from reading the books. The stories of Kathakali are the same as those from devotional (bhakti) literature. We know the songs and acting corresponding to it. We know who the characters are, what the scenes are and what they are singing.

(K.V.Raja Lakshmi, 66 year old, housewife, Sudra caste, Sri Krishna Temple, Kavassery, 6.12.’92)
The insistence upon a very refined understanding of the details of the narratives in order to appreciate the performance is also emphasised by C. Balakrishnan when he refers not only to the incidents and actions of the narrative, but importantly for him, to the development of character subtleties.

_I am of the view that a pre-condition for its enjoyment is a detailed knowledge of the story. Not only the incidents, but, as I said, you must be aware of the Puranic characters and you must assess and become familiar with their outstanding qualities and you must look for those qualities being displayed on the stage._ (C. Balakrishnan, 69 year old, chartered accountant, Nair caste, Pallakad Kathakali Club, 20.12.’92)

_Only those who know the story can appreciate it._
(Jayanthi, 14 year old student, Thandan caste, Perumangod Vishnu Temple, Perangod, 17.12.’92)

**The Perception of Integrality as Performance Competence?**

The following interview from another club member, M.V. Radakrishnan, stresses the importance of knowing the story of a Kathakali performance. However, it does so against the wider context of integrality of performance and with an acknowledgement that general literacy is not a guarantee of the specific details of narrative required for a particular performance. Stress is once again being laid here on an elitist perspective of the need for complete understanding of every detail for appreciation of the integral performance.

_First of all he must know the theme of the story and he must know the story. Next one, it is a combination of all of the different arts…and also the music, etc. He must know something about all of these things, otherwise he can’t appreciate and he can’t enjoy. And a layman can do nothing with Kathakali, a layman or an illiterate person. He may be a literate person also. He may be a well-educated person but if he doesn’t know the story, he can do nothing with Kathakali. [If he is a Hindu and he lives in this community, wouldn’t he know the story already?] As far as being a Hindu, he may know something about the story, but he doesn’t know the details and also every nook and corner of the story. I know a lot of friends who are Hindus and they don’t know all these stories in detail. They know things generally, but not in detail and they can’t appreciate all these._
(M.V. Radha Krishnan, 27 year old, school teacher, Warier caste, Mangod Kathakali Club, 12.12.’92)
Knowledge of the Mudra Narration as Performance Competence?

A refined understanding of mudra in Kathakali remains, for many club members, the *sine qua non* of elitist appreciators. Others contextualise the contribution of mudra as one determinant among many, all of which contribute to the integrality of performance. It is then, for this latter group, the degree of appreciation of the aesthetic inter-penetration of performance determinants, within this integrality, that marks the development of an elite of appreciators.

While Syamala Sundaram, the respondent whose comments now follow acknowledges the importance of an understanding of mudra and of the story, she relates those observations to the wider context of the diverse and inter-relating determinants of performance. She also provides some insight into the contemporary social and domestic pressures in many rural areas of Kerala, areas in which neighbours have set other agendas. Sometimes they belittle the contribution of all-night Kathakali performances to their particular notions of social development and of domestic responsibility. Syamala Sundaram is a passionate appreciator of Kathakali who derives ineffable pleasure from its performance. She attends all night performances at the cost of criticism of her apparent neglect of what others consider pressing responsibilities.

(One) should have some knowledge of the mudras. There has been a change in our country. Many people take going to Kathakali as a bad thing. Even when I come from my place, people sarcastically tell one another that I have nothing to do at home. Only we know how much I have done in preparation for the next day in order to be able to devote the whole night solely to this. There are problems like not being able to sleep at home the next day. But I cannot express what I get from a good performance. There are some new stories that are not difficult to appreciate. Because they are purely in Malayalam, Kalamandalam Kesavan’s “Bhima Bhandanam” and Mali’s “Karna Sapadham” are not at all difficult for the common people to appreciate. [The mudras?] One can understand from the singing, can’t one? They (the songs) are simpler in these plays than those in “Nala Charitam”.

(Syamala Sundaram, 42 year old housewife, Nair caste, Perumangod Vishnu Temple, Perangod, 17.12.’92)
Another respondent, Rama Krishnan Nair, refers to mudra but also expresses the need of the appreciator to integrate the singing and the acting and dancing and to recognise the inter-relationship of these determinants, which are undertaken by separate performers. Nevertheless, he emphasises a knowledge of mudra as the linking medium of narrative, the determinant which continues to operate when the song in Malayalam ceases and the actor continues with his own voiceless rendering of the narrative, through mudra.

Unlike the cinema and drama, the singing and acting are not done by the actor alone. The singing is done by one and the acting by another, aren’t they? There are some people who can’t fully appreciate it. Mostly the stories from the Puranas are adopted for Kathakali. It might be odious for those who have no experience with it. Common people have no concept of the mudras. When there is singing one can understand them from it. When there is no singing there is only the dancing. Then it will be difficult to understand it. For all these reasons, not everyone can appreciate Kathakali.

(Rama Krishnan Nair, 68 year old, retired village officer, Nair caste, Mangod Kathakali Club, 12.12.’92)

Song, Rhythm and Music as Performance Competence?

The important, and for some, over-riding, contribution of the singing as a key to the development of performance competence in the spectator has already been alluded to in comments reported in this chapter but within the context of a discussion of the importance of knowing the stories. It has already been noted that the songs, which are rendered in Malayalam, can provide not only an input to the narrative detail of the performance, but also a service of translation, in terms of a parallel unfolding of the story in song, in similar detail to its unfolding in mudra. Certainly, the singing, through this translating function, provides for instruction. Two brief excerpts from those respondents are repeated here below to focus further on the importance that they ascribe to the singing:

Only if one knows something about the stories and has an interest in songs.
(Ravi Verma, 52 year old, school teacher, Verma/Kshatriya caste, Sri Krishna Temple, Kavassery, 6.12.’92)

The stories of Kathakali are the same as those from devotional (bhakti) literature. We know the songs and acting corresponding to it. We know who the characters are, what the scenes are and what they are singing.
What these respondents express as being of importance is a knowledge of the words and meaning of song, but in reality they are also affected by the very familiar rhythms of music that inheres to them. It is relatively difficult for the non-specialist to talk about music. Comment on word in song generally comes more easily. However, one respondent, Munthara Chandera Shekar, who is a club member, underscored the importance of rhythm and music and did not link them specifically to the deciphering of mudra narration. He provided the following remarks on his appreciation of Kathakali.

*I do believe that people who have a basic knowledge of art can certainly enjoy them. [Art?] Actually, I give a lot of importance to the rhythm and the music.*

(Munthara Chandera Shekar, 47 year old, accountant, Nair caste, Palakkad Kathakali Club, 20.12.’92)

**Conditions for Acquiring Performance Competence?**

Religion, worship and devotion have already been discussed in the context of sacralising Kathakali (See Chapter Nine) and Krishnan’s interview (Shri Krishna Temple, Kavassery, Palghat District, and 6.12.’92), which was reported in full, also clearly established his perception of the temples as centres for learning and the importance of a devotional attitude to the process of acquiring further competence in performance. The following respondents offered other conditions that seem important to their acquiring greater performance competence.

Kumar, whose comments now follow, emphasised the importance, within the spectators’ learning processes of simply watching attentively.

*If one can find time to spend on understanding the action, it is possible to understand. If people don’t pay attention to Kathakali when it is going on, they can’t understand it.*

(Kumar, 23 year old commercial artist, Parayan/Harijan caste, Sri Krishna Temple, Kavassery, 6.12.’92)
An ability to focus on one or more performance determinants attentively is a primary competence for the development of more intellectual aspects of appreciation. This ability, along with the more contemplative processes, may explain much about “natural talent” and “innate propensity” referred to by respondents such as the following. Krishna Kumar, whose remarks follow, laid stress on the importance of having talents in musical appreciation or in mudra interpretation. However he also gave due importance to the processes of enquiry and information exchange amongst spectators, a process which itself is provoked and enhanced by the primary skill of attentive participation simply as a spectator, watching.

*It requires a natural talent. That is an innate propensity, either to the music or to the accompanying mudras. Then those others who themselves want to learn can do so by asking and by understanding.*

(Krishna Kumar A., 27 year old, unemployed, Nair caste, Sri Krishna Temple, Kavassery, 6.12.’97)

The accumulated experiences of attentive watchfulness, the fostering of the habit of being an attentive spectator brings due rewards of understanding. Spectators can improve their lot just by keeping awake and being attentive during the long performances:

*One can understand Kathakali if one has been accustomed to watching Kathakali for a long time. It is simple to any common man, if he has tried to understand it from the beginning. On the contrary, if one sees it for the first time, he can’t understand anything. He will doze off. That’s the difference. A common man can understand it if he has some experience with it.*

(Krishna Das, 16 year old student, Nair caste, Mangod Kathakali Club, 12.12.’92)

*Yes. Everyone in this group here can understand it.*[Question repeated]*Each one has a different level of consciousness.*

(Thalambal, 52 year old, housewife, Brahmin, Sri Krishna Temple, Kavassery, 6.12.’92)

*If they come and sit and dedicate half an hour or an hour to the performance, certainly they will enjoy it, because the mudras we see normally, the mudras are there. And the Sanskrit singing is quite prominent and our language is much influenced with Sanskrit. Because there is so much Sanskrit influence in Malayalam, the Sanskrit in the performance will not be a great problem to the spectator who is really dedicated. I took a cousin of mine who had no experience of Kathakali to a festival and he watched it for only three days. He previously never used to enjoy Kathakali. He was just going to college. Within that three days he was able to understand and he has become a great fan of Kathakali. Certainly, everyone can have access to Kathakali, if they really mind.*

(A.K.Nair, 48 year old, retired electronics engineer, Nair caste, Kallappadi Siva Temple, Keralassery, 22.12.’92)
A.K. Nair’s comments allow space even for the foreign spectators who rapidly develop an interest from their initial engagement by Kathakali performances. His pronouncement on accessibility is made universally. How different is his perception from that of a local school-teacher who approached me among the rapidly growing crowd of seated spectators in the early evening (13.12. ’91) at a traditional temple-festival performance at Vellinezhi. This person sat beside me in order to make contact in English and to ask for my address. He expressed his admiration for foreigners who travelled and studied for purposes of research, they being motivated by personal interest whereas “we only study in order to face exams”. Gesturing to the spectators who surrounded us, he assured me that “these coolies understand nothing of Kathakali” and that they only came along for the community experience. His arm swept across the immediate landscape crowded with an ever-increasing throng of spectators. Why then was such a throng of agricultural workers, pulsating with the buzz of excited conversation and preparing for an all-night sitting on the open grassed space before the canopied stage? Did the occasion represent just another opportunity for communal bonding, as intimated by my interlocutor? I think not, from my own observations and the comments of other respondents.

Let us take one instance. The small township of Vellinezhi is in a very rural setting in a district that is noted for the outstanding number of local residents that it provides to the ranks of Kathakali performers. Most extended families have provided someone for training of some kind in Kathakali, or have close community contacts with neighbours who have done so, over generations. My own field notes on that night (13.12. ’91) allude to the density of spectators present and their persistent attentiveness despite relative discomfort. They include the following description:

Balasubrahmanian, the final year Kathakali student-actor from the Kalamandalam and a native of Vellinezhi, kept me company throughout the night, with his friend Sivadas on the other side of him. Balasubrahmanian laughed at all of the jokes conveyed by mudras and translated them for Sivadas. The traditional ground seating was even more uncomfortable than usual as the locals packed in as closely as possible to the stage; bodily contact with at least three or four other spectators was unavoidable in the stretching and shifting of cramped legs and hindquarters. Balasubrahmanian variously draped his crossed
Surely the local school-teacher’s remarks came from a most ungenerous assessment of local performance competencies, from a position designed to reaffirm his own membership of an elite. On the other hand, Radha Krishnan, himself a club member and appreciator of Kathakali, in a different setting, is more generous in his appraisal of the level of performance competencies that can be developed by the more-than-casual spectator of Kathakali, and specifically by the residents of Vellinezhi.

I believe that most people from Palghat district can understand it. That is in the zones of Mangod, Vellinezhi, etc., because most Kathakali artists and the backstage workers are from here. Vellinezhi is famous for Kathakali. So I believe most of the local people can understand Kathakali.

(Radha Krishnan, 28 year old, soldier, Panikkar caste, Mangod Kathakali Club, 12.12.’92)

T.S.Madhavan Kutty, whose full interview is quoted in Chapter Seven, has revealed himself as an appreciator of Kathakali who is erudite, reflective and modest. Although he belongs to an elite group of club members and appreciators, he seems less bound to the club agendas when he tries to articulate the kinds of access and experiences that others might achieve when participating as spectators to Kathakali performances. He allows for the contribution that general cultural insights drawn from knowledge of Indian mythology can provide for accessing Kathakali. He is also very specific in his inclusion of foreign spectators in those who can very rapidly gain an attraction to and an enthusiasm for Kathakali.

It depends. I think that someone who does not know the gestures can follow, but he must have a knowledge of Indian mythology. If he is aware of these things, he can follow Kathakali.

[All in the Hindu community?] I don’t know. In my professional experience at the Ayurvedic centre we are used to having so many foreigners and we also have a Kathakali troupe. At certain times I have been engaged to look after these foreigner visitors. We used to perform a Kathakali program for one or two hours and I used to sit and give a running commentary. More than once these visitors have said, after half an hour or so, “Please, stop. Your sound is disturbing me.” That means that this foreign man doesn’t know Indian mythology, nor Kathakali terminology, but even so he is following it. There have been so many experiences like that. So I hope that everyone can follow Kathakali, but he must have a fondness, a liking, he must be attuned to Kathakali.

(T.S.Madhavan Kutty, 38 year old, Doctor of Ayurvedic medicine, Warier caste, Trichur Kathakali Club, 19.12.’92)
Perceived Individual Tastes in Approaching Kathakali?

(Regarding equality of access to Kathakali to all) *I am unable to say. Everyone has different tastes, don’t they?* (Kalamandalam Usha, 23 year old, teacher of Bharata Natyam, Nair caste, Mangod Kathakali Club, 12.12.‘92)

*Not everyone can. Some like this very much. Some don’t. Not everybody has the same taste, have they?* (Ammukutty, 77 year old, Housewife, Thandan caste, Perumangod Vishnu Temple, Perangod, 17.12.‘92)

*It is up to the individual’s taste. If I like Kathakali, a friend of mine of the same age may not like it. Tastes are different, aren’t they? Some may like dance, some may like Kathakali, Odissi, or Manippuri? [Innate?] It is not innate. Some may like Kathakali even though their family members may not have had any artistic interests. The foreigners are an example, aren’t they? There may be some in whom it is in-born.* (Ambili, 19 year old, dance student, Nair caste, Perumangod Vishnu Temple, 17.2.‘92)

*No. Firstly, one should have an artistic heart. Can everyone enjoy poetry? Can we appreciate the poetry of Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan, the contemporary Malayalee poet, as we do that of others? One can only appreciate poetry if one has a poetic sense. The ability to appreciate is a small part of the poetic sense, isn’t it? One can only appreciate an art if one has a poetic heart. Also, firstly, one should know the story. It is difficult. [Temple festival spectators?] In some localities, more people gather. That is, they have a tradition there; the tradition of going to Kathakali. If the father goes to Kathakali, so too will the son. In this area it is very poor. As Kathakali is conducted in the temples, there is a general feeling that the spectator should not pay. That’s how people feel. A performance costs about five thousand rupees.* (Raman Namboothiripad, 60 year old, retired teacher, Namboothiripad caste, Trichur Kathakali Club, 19.12.‘92)

*It may not be the case. Even amongst the group that I come with; sometimes they complain that they didn’t like this or that. People are different. Some may not like some scenes. Some may not have enough experience with the mudras, so it will be difficult to follow. I don’t think everyone appreciates it in like manner.* (Rugmini Varasyar, 34 year old housewife, Warrier caste, Mangod Kathakali Club, 12.12.‘92)

*It can’t be so. The average young people like “orchestra” (modern music, film songs, etc. in live concert) more; because in “orchestra” songs and all will be there. When they come to see... only bhava and gestures will be there, and the youth might not like it. Then there are these old people, those who like the
“Mahabharata” and the like. You can see. Only they will be present. The present life of young people doesn’t appreciate Kathakali.
(Sankara Narayanan, 24 year old, unemployed Brahmin, Sri Krishna Temple, Kavassery, 6.12.’92)

No. The young people of today can’t appreciate it. If there are any old-aged people, they can appreciate it. They come by bus, taking the trouble to bring their own food, if they can’t get it from here, in order to see it.
(Velayudhan, 58 year old, balloon seller, Ezhava caste, Sri Krishna Temple, Kavassery, 6.12.’92)

Not everyone may know about the story, nor about the mudras. And then they may not have much knowledge about the music either. That is not to say that I know. I have learned a little of Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam. And that made me interested in Kathakali.
(Malini, 19 year old student, Menon caste, Perumangod Vishnu temple, Perangod, 17.12.’92)

Such observations as these may affirm the very individualistic preferences that are manifested by spectators and appreciators when they participate in a Kathakali performance. However from this exploration of their discourse we could also say that the same comments, viewed collectively, mirror the inter-relationships and the integrality of Kathakali’s various determinants of performance.

Conclusions

The primary focus of this chapter has been the discourses of spectators on performance competence based on my interviews. However, on the basis of extrapolation from those interviews, my own observations in the field and my reading of texts, I would make the following observations.

The highly integrated nature of Kathakali brings together theatre of the word, firstly, in a classical reference, by way of its Sanskrit slokas, and subsequently in the elaboration of those slokas in the sung narratives in Malayalam and then in parallel translation into the grammar and syntax of mudra. However, the determinants of the word are highly integrated with performance determinants that are non-verbal, such as the traditional rhythms of
music, the dance patterns and mime. These are inter-laid with other spectacular performance determinants such as the rigorously conventionalised types of make-up and costuming, the categories of facial expressions and eye-movements and the highly disciplined range of energetic responses conveyed by actors. All of these provide an integrated performance structure that ranges over a continuum of performance competencies from what may be perceived as more popular culture to more elitist.

Within this integrality, and across this continuum, different orders of performance competence are subsumed within others, in the progression from the status of popular spectator to elitist appreciator. The dedicated observer, through the process of familiarisation, can achieve this progression to a level of culture that, in Bourdieu’s terms, is “mondain”. However, some of the Kathakali clubs set an agenda that ordains pre-eminently an understanding of the determinant of mudra. They do this when they set up a simultaneous translator to render mudra directly into Malayalam for the benefit of their members. When this occurs, the integrality of Kathakali is ruptured and distorted and hegemony of the word is re-affirmed over the other performance determinants. Not all appreciators of Kathakali undertake a performance analysis such as this one, which would fit Bourdieu’s notion of “pedant” process. The traditional temple-festival performances of Kathakali in rural Kerala do not usually include mudra translation to Malayalam. Many elitist appreciators achieve their highly “mondain” culture through long processes of familiarisation. It seems from the interviews that I have conducted that these elitist appreciators continue to acknowledge the highly integrated nature of Kathakali and that they further develop an awareness of the inter-relationship of performance determinants and of their inter-penetration, which lies at the centre of their aesthetics. However, still other Kathakali club members often unwittingly accept the club’s prioritised agenda of the hegemony of the word and its pre- eminent acolyte, mudra, and this positioning is reflected in their responses in the interviews.

In the perspective of traditional aesthetics offered by Coomaraswamy, it seems to me that the diversity of determinants that integrally constitute
performance is absorbed by the attentive and reflective observer into a condition of familiarity that defies articulation by the subject. The processes of familiarisation within the cultural “mondains”, outlined by Bourdieu, are also in sympathy with Coomaraswamy’s perspective on traditional aesthetics. Coomaraswamy (1974a: 108-9) in his essay, “Reactions to Art in India”, says:

To sum up, it will be seen that everyone is thought of as making use of the work of art in his own way, the work of visual art, no less than a word, being a kama-dhenu, yielding to the spectator just what he seeks from it or is capable of understanding. Everyone is interested in the subject matter or application of the work, as a matter of course. More specifically, we find that learned men, pundits, are concerned about the correctness of the iconography; the pious are interested in the representation of the holy themes as such; connoisseurs … are moved by the expression of bhava and rasa, and like to express their appreciation in the technical terminology of rhetoric; masters of the art, fellow artists, regard chiefly the drawing, and technical skill in general; ordinary laymen like the bright colours, or marvel at the artist’s dexterity. Those who are in love are chiefly interested in portraiture reflecting all the charms … of the original. Rarely do we meet with any mention of originality or novelty. We ought then, to appreciate Indian art from every point of view, to be equipped with learning, piety, sensibility, knowledge of technique, and simplicity.

In his reference here to the universal interest in the “subject matter or application of the work”, I think he provides space also for a reading of the thematic categories provided by Tarlekar’s reading of the Natyasastra, that is, a classification of popular and elitist groups is possible on the basis of the particular subjects or themes that interest them. Coomaraswamy’s observations on the iconographic interest of pundits and the various technicalities that interest connoisseurs leaves room, I think, also for a discussion of the various performance competencies that I have raised, that is, that different performance determinants have particular appeal to individuals and may even be extrapolated by them from a technical interest. He also, I think, includes a space for the popular spectators, the “laymen” who are attracted to the bright colours and the dexterity of the artist, those to whom I refer to as the popular spectators of Kathakali. His final sentence, like the collective view of interview responses that I have quoted in this chapter, seems to acknowledge the diversity of approaches and the integral nature of art, here the performance of Kathakali.

**Concluding Remarks**
Within the dramaturgy of the spectator (De Marinis, Pavis, Elam) there inhere aesthetic values that reflect the wider local culture: the performance worlds provide a microcosm of socio-cultural values. The application of this dramaturgy of the spectator within the worlds of Kathakali involves the spectator’s interaction with the formal characteristics of Kathakali, the rigidly conventionalised dimensions that are presented integrally in performance, the performance codes. In the process of this dramaturgy of the spectator, aesthetic values are brought to bear and emotions are elicited within aesthetic experience. The formal characteristics of the performance also carry a semiotic value and this provides for the touch of the intellect to emotional response. It is, then, cognition, emotion and the aesthetic quality that together shape aesthetic experience; and they are themselves shaped by it. In their bringing to bear diverse aesthetics of more or less intellectual or emotional character, onlookers to the worlds of Kathakali may be discerned as two broad groups: popular spectators and elitist appreciators, identifiable by their diverse but often overlapping aesthetic values.

Among these diverse aesthetic values there may be the performance dimensions that belong to theatre of the word and encompass the classical and Brahmanic values of Sanskrit, the relatively hermetic language of mudra and the sometimes Sanskritised sung Malayalam. Inter-layered with these there are probably the more spectacular dimensions of performance, the performance codes of brilliantly colourful and grotesque make-up and costuming, all stringently conventionalised, along with the facial expressions and eye-movements and the disciplined energetic responses of the actor’s movements. And then there is the music. The responses of individuals to these dimensions will be determined by their levels of performance competence.

My field-work indicates that different orders of performance competence on the part of onlookers are subsumed within others, some more elitist, some more popular. However, at the heart of the aesthetic values brought to bear by elitist appreciators there seems to be an awareness of the inter-relationship of the various performance codes and, at their aesthetic culmination, an inter-penetration of them. The diversity of the codes that constitute a performance,
within the processes of the attentive and reflective observer, is absorbed to a point of familiarity and inter-penetration, which constitutes connoisseurship of Kathakali.

My interviews also reveal that elitist groups of self-styled appreciators may set agendas that hegemonise particular performance competencies over others, but ultimately, in terms of traditional aesthetics, it is familiarity that will mark the connoisseur. From the interview responses, it seems to be a mark of Kathakali that this status can be acquired through dedicated and contemplative attention to the performance on the part of the popular spectator, who thus begins a process of self-instruction towards becoming a connoisseur. A key to this process is the diversity and integrality of the inter-layered performance codes and the levels of translation of the narrative that they offer across Sanskrit, Malayalam and mudra in the enactment of the familiar Hindu epics. Such is the diversity and integrality that regardless of what dimension of the performance strikes initial appeal, spectacle, music, story, and so on, contemplative spectatorship will progressively incorporate the other dimensions into the familiarity that characterises connoisseurship.

For many of the traditional onlookers to Kathakali much of the performance will be framed by an attitude of bhakti, which will at times be sacralising to the performance within their semiosis, as is borne out in the interviews. However, bhakti, which offers spiritually an egalitarian liberation from a rigidly hierarchised society, does not confine itself to metaphysics: it has socio-political dimensions. The aesthetic experiences that derive from bhakti attitudes are also mediated through both emotions and the touch of cognition.

At the root of traditional Indian aesthetics, birthed in Bharata’s theory of rasa, developed by subsequent commentators, notably, Abhinavagupta, and promulgated in recent times by Coomaraswamy, amongst others, there inheres metaphysics of non-dualism. It is this Mediaeval Indian philosophy that accommodates the mystic fusion of subject/object. Mythic truths may be realised, perhaps transcendentally, within the reception processes of popular spectators and elitist appreciators alike, perhaps with differing measures of the
fusion struck by cognition and emotions and rationality and sentiment. However, it is within the contemplative and meditative attitude that, ideally, the subject/object complexity of non-dualistic metaphysics is dissolved; it is there too that the boundaries of cognition/emotion are rendered fluid. The transcendence that marks the Indian aesthetic experience of performance described by Bharata is what inscribes its culminating moments with bliss; and those joyful moments and the performance dynamics that are conducive to them are not easily articulated verbally.

Nevertheless, the respondents to my interviews have attempted to articulate what for them are the significant dimensions in their attraction to and appreciation of Kathakali. From the interviews it is clear that the sheer spectacle of Kathakali can easily seduce all to becoming attuned to the performance and developing an appreciation of its other dimensions. The key to wider understanding and appreciation realised through self-instruction seems to be a good understanding of the traditional Hindu epics, which are enacted in Kathakali. In Bharata’s traditional aesthetics, what often has a significant effect upon the aesthetic experience is the attitude of bhakti, which frequently accompanies a traditional interest in the epic stories of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. It is often the accompanying bhakti attitude that enlivens knowledge of the stories, here enacted, and enables the spectator’s transcendence to mythic truths embodied in the performance.

It has already been noted that the spiritual egalitarianism of bhakti inevitably impacts also at socio-political levels. In the traditional worlds of Kathakali the metaphysical values and the mythic truths carry their socio-political overtones. The Hindu epics, whence the mythic truths derive, also impart narrative details, which are not egalitarian but recount the struggles for power: they too are political. So it is not surprising that within the worlds of Kathakali there are more secular movements that underscore the political realities of contemporary India and seek consciously to impart yet another fusion, that of cultural development through the appreciation both of the traditional, formal structures of Kathakali, and relevant contemporary political awareness.
In this more secular and contemporary context, the popularising of Kathakali and the politicising of spectators to an awareness of the threat of “fundamentalist” attitudes to inter-community harmony in India is currently being promulgated, notably by Sreedharan. His initiatives in secularising and popularising Kathakali have provided a strong catalyst to reactionary pronouncements in the interviews from those who continue to uphold a belief in the purity of origins of Kathakali. Such a view-point ignores the historical pattern of continual modifications to Kathakali and the eclectic nature of its development from contiguous performance genres. This view is itself, perhaps, a reflection of the conservatism of strong Brahmanic values that continue to uphold a purity/pollution principle and mark the performance worlds with the hierarchical elitism that characterises caste-ism in Hindu society. Such reactionary thinking should not, however, be seen to be shaped by religious arguments alone, as they might claim. The shaping and re-shaping of more and less hierarchical social structures in Kerala has been due also to changes in traditional patterns of governance, through the long era of colonialism and subsequently by the intervention of elected Leftist governments that have radically reformed the pattern of traditional land-holding and the privileges that attend it. These socio-economic and political factors, along with the traditional metaphysical and religious arguments have also given shape to the conservatism of more reactionary responses within the worlds of Kathakali.

The important findings in my work are: the political shaping of the aesthetics that accompany elitist/popular tensions; and the ways in which Kathakali performance offers self-instruction for improved performance competence and hence upward mobility between these groups.

Appendix 1 - Ayyappa’s Story
According to Krishnan Kutty\textsuperscript{98} Ayyappa’s story goes like this:

Durvasa, a short-tempered godly saint once came to possess a wonderfully fragrant garland of flowers (I am not able to recollect how he got this garland). He presented this garland to Indra who was riding on Iravatha, the mighty white elephant.

Indra carelessly placed the garland on Iravatha’s head. Soon hundreds of bees began to bother the elephant and he eventually took it with his trunk and smashed it on the ground. This tragic end of the dear Garland infuriated the saint and he cursed Indra and all of the gods under him to mortality; because he thought that immortality had made Indra haughty and hence the insult.

Indra and the other gods immediately grew old with grey hair and beard and with wrinkled skin. They rushed to Vishnu (I guess it was Vishnu) and appealed to him. He advised them to churn the milky ocean, an imaginary ocean of the heavens, upon which Vishnu relaxes on the back of Anantha, the thousand headed python, in order to get the amrut, the nectar or magic potion for immortality.

Churning the milky ocean being a Herculean task which the physically weak gods alone could certainly not do, Vishnu suggested the gods take the help of the Rakshasas, the heathens. The Rakshasas were promised a share of the potion; and they helped. A mountain was brought into use as a churning stick. Anantha, the python was used as a rope. Rakshasas held the head end of the snake and the gods the tail. The labour and pains made the snake spit venom. The fear that the whole world would perish should the venom fall on the ground made the gods run to Shiva for help. He took the poison in his mouth. But his wife Parvathi didn’t allow it to go down his throat. The venom stuck in his throat and gave him a blue-ish colour; and gave him a name, Neela Kanda, the blue neck.

Churning resumed. The ocean yielded a variety of magnificent wonders. Goddesses of wealth and wisdom (Vishnu and Brahma shared them among themselves), a mighty sword edged in diamond (Indra took it for himself; and when he waves it lightning and thunder result); a tree which yields everything everyone could wish for, a cow with unlimited source of milk and so on.

Lastly came Dhanwanthari, the god of medicine, with a pot full of the nectar. Now the gods wanted it all for themselves, but the mightier heathens easily took it away from them. The gods again appealed to Vishnu and he disguised himself as a seducing beauty, Mohini, and went off and tricked the fighting Rakshasas.

Later, Shiva wanted to hear from Vishnu about the role that he had played and in the re-telling of events asked him to transform himself once more into the seductive form of Mohini. Vishnu did so. So overpowering was his/her seductive charm that Mohini was soon impregnated by Siva and gave birth to Ayyappa. (Krishnan Kutty, Mussoorie, January ‘97)

There appears to be no reference to Ayyappa in the Puranic literature but he has a large following of devotees, many of whom make annual pilgrimages,
from within Kerala and from without, to his temple at Sabarimala. According to popular accounts, here rendered by Krishnan Kutty, Ayyappa was conceived of the union between the god Shiva, the Destroyer, and Vishnu, the Preserver, when the latter, at the behest of the former, assumed once more the form of a seductress, which he had previously adopted in order to vanquish opponents. Ayyappa, according to some scholars, provides for manifest links between Buddhism and Hinduism. Menon (1991:78-9) tells us:

Some scholars believe that the famous deity Sastha or Ayyappa is the Hinduised version of the Buddha and that the pilgrimage to the Sastha shrine at Sabarimala contains traces of Buddhist influence. The Sabarimala pilgrims observe strict vows of non-violence, vegetarianism and abstinence from worldly pleasures for about two months prior to their pilgrimage and this is considered to be a practice reminiscent of the Buddhist doctrine of “Ahimsa”. Further, the pilgrims do not observe caste distinctions during the period of their vow and this also accords well with the Buddhist emphasis on castelessness and cosmopolitanism.

Menon goes on to provide other aspects of the sect that are seen by some scholars to demonstrate shared characteristics of Buddhist traditions.

**Appendix Two – The Theory of Rasa**
For a very long time debates on *rasa* have abounded and what I present here is a simplified account of the theory.

In Sanskrit the term that comes nearest to “aesthetic” is *rasa*, which was borrowed from the Ayurvedic Sastras, an encyclopaedia of Indian traditional medical practice, wherein among its many connotations it may read as “juice or bodily fluid” (Pandit, 1977:27). According to Pandit (1977:31), the concept of *rasa* was first applied to poetry and drama by Bharata in the *Natyasastra* (from between 200BC-200AD) but it was subsequently carried over to other art forms. Pandit (1977:7) tells us that:

(This) *rasa*, concretely understood as juice or flavour, eventually becomes the focal theme of controversy for all later Indian aesthetic thinkers and raised the practical study of art from its mundane setting and brought it on a par with other philosophical disciplines.

In an aphorism referring directly to the nature of *rasa* Bharata said, according to Gnoli (1956:29):

Out of the determinants (*vibhava*), consequents (*anubhava*) and transitory mental states (*vyabhcharin*) the birth of *rasa* takes place.

In relation to Kathakali the “determinants” may refer to its staging and milieu, the actual physical media; the “consequents” refer to the reactions of the onlookers to the performance; the “transitory mental states” are those momentary responses that accompany the determinants and the consequences; and it is from the combination of these three factors that *rasa* is born. Pandit (1977:11) seems to be elaborating upon this aphorism when he says that:

…(I)n an art work, *rasa* is that unique quality which moves the audience; in the spectators’ experience it is the distinct emotion produced by the art object, and in the artist’s intuition it constitutes creative energy. Strictly, it is an all-inclusive, indivisible experience analysed separately for purposes of academic discussion alone.

Bharata originally developed a system of eight rasas but at a later stage, and certainly in the elaborative work of Abhinavagupta (tenth - eleventh century) the highly acclaimed interpreter of Bharata’s aphorisms, a ninth rasa, “serenity”, has been added. In this aesthetic context, the term *rasa* is used to denote a special kind of feeling that is distinguished from “emotion as an ordinary physical phenomenon, referred to as *bhava*. The two have an intimate connection but they are generically different” (Pandit, 1977:33). The nine
headings under which all emotional activity could then be grouped are, according to Rayan (1987:114):

permanent emotions (sthayins) based on universal psychic dispositions (vasanas) in human nature – deposits of previous experience, inherited (from one’s former lives) as well as individual. A sthayin lies latent and inert within a man [sic] except when a stimulus activates it for a while. Sthayins are universal equipment, and all men [sic] are potentially capable of the realisation of rasa.

Rayan (1987:115) lists the nine specific rasas that grow out of the nine sthayins as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sthayins</th>
<th>Rasas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rati (the sexual emotion)</td>
<td>Sringara (love)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasa (laughter/amusement)</td>
<td>Hasya (the comic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soka (grief/distress)</td>
<td>Karuna (pathos)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krodha (anger)</td>
<td>Raudra (anger)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utsaha (masterfulness/energy)</td>
<td>Vira (the heroic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhaya (fear)</td>
<td>Bhayanaka (fear)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jugupsa (disgust)</td>
<td>Bibhatsa (disgust)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vismaya (wonder)</td>
<td>Adbhuta (wonder)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sama (subsidence)</td>
<td>Shantai (serenity)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

…The actual factors of an emotion in life are transformed thus into the conventional associates of the same emotion in art. They have a purely aesthetic existence – they are not real or practical, but idealised; they are not personal or particular but universalised (Rayan, 1987:116).

The nine permanent emotions (sthayin) listed above may be preceded or accompanied by thirty-three other transitory emotions (Kondos, “Fire, Heroes and the Cosmic”, forthcoming in TAPA) which are asthayin. The nine rasas that grow out of the permanent emotions then provide for the emergence of a dominant rasa that characterises the particular performance. Gnoli (1956:92) says:

Transitory Mental Movements follow one another, threaded on the thread of the Permanent Mental State. They rise and set an infinity of times. They may be compared to beads of crystal, glass, mica, topaz, emerald, sapphire etc., continuously changing their position, threaded, so as to be set rather far apart, on a red or dark blue thread. These beads on such a thread leave no trace of themselves, but all the same they nourish the ornamental composition animated by this thread.

The main points of this theory of rasa are summarised thus by Pandit (1977:33):

(a) rasa is not feeling in the ordinary sense, though it is constituted of the same material; it bears all the characteristics of actual feeling, yet it is free from its adverse effects; consequently it is essentially and invariably pleasurable;
(b) *rasa* is achieved when everyday feelings (*bhava*) are purified on the one hand through the medium of art, and on the other hand through the imaginative faculty of the spectator. The ‘union’ of the determinants, consequents and transitory mental states that Bharata refers to, is the delicate balance of these forces, their subtle interaction within the aesthetic situation.

Appendix 3 – Frequencies of Popular Choices.
In order to provide a popularity profile of the ranking of the stories most frequently performed, I asked subjects to nominate their favorites. The explicitly nominated plays and the frequency of their being mentioned from the entire sample of forty subjects were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nala Charitam</td>
<td>[M]</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kichaka Vadha</td>
<td>[M]</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttara Swayamvara</td>
<td>[M]</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duryodhana Vadha</td>
<td>[M]</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santana Gopala</td>
<td>[BG]</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karna Sapadham</td>
<td>[M]</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuchela Vritta</td>
<td>[BP]</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajasuya</td>
<td>[M]</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramayana</td>
<td>[R]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rugmini Swayamvara</td>
<td>[BP]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rugmangada Charita</td>
<td>[m]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daksha Yaga</td>
<td>[m]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayappa Charitam</td>
<td>[m]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harischandra Charita</td>
<td>[m]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puttana Moksha</td>
<td>[BP]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bali Vijaya</td>
<td>[R]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalyana Saugandhika</td>
<td>[M]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ravana Vijaya</td>
<td>[R]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bali Vadha</td>
<td>[R]</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Key: [BP]: Bhagavata Purana [M]: Mahabharata [m]: miscellaneous [R]: Ramayana

The favourite characters specifically nominated and the frequency of their being mentioned across the entire group of forty interviewees were as follows.

- Krishna: 8
- All Characters: 7
- Bhima: 3
- Nala: 3
- Arjuna: 2
- Damayanti (Nala’s consort): 2
- “Katti”: 2
- Durhodhana: 1
- Kuchela: 1
- “Paccha”: 1

Appendix Four - Myth, Psychology and Indology

I believe that a large part of the mythological view of the world, which extends a long way into most modern religions, is nothing but psychology projected into the external world. The obscure recognition (the endopsychic perception, as it were) of psychical factors and relations in the unconscious is mirrored – it is difficult to express it in other terms... in the construction of a supernatural reality, which is destined to be changed back once more by science into the psychology of the unconscious. One could venture to explain in this way the myths of paradise and the fall of man, of God, of good and evil, of immortality, and so on, and to transform metaphysics into metapsychology.

Isbister (1985:215) goes on to quote from a letter by Freud to Oppenheim, subsequently published in *Dreams and Folklore* (Freud and Oppenheim, 1958:13):

I have long been haunted by the idea that our studies on the content of the neuroses might be destined to solve the riddle of the formation of myths, and that the nucleus of mythology is nothing other than what we speak of as ‘the nuclear complex of the neurosis’.

In his own comments on Freud’s position, vis-à-vis Jung’s, Isbister (1985:211) goes on to say:

In reality, Freud was self-consciously asserting his fundamental opposition to anything but his own understanding of religion – he could countenance no alternative explanation. In contrast there is a good deal of cogency to the argument that sees the language of psychology as one way of talking about reality, and the language of religion as another, equally valid, way of talking about the same thing. Freud ruled out the language of religion by fiat – declaring it unnecessary and dispensable – his language, the reductionist language of metapsychology, became the only permissible mode of discourse.

The issue of intertextualities, when considered in the context of Western observers of Indian traditions, opens up the wider discourse of Orientalism and the Indologist (Inden 1986) and also the divergence between the uses of various psychological theories that may underpin the attempts of such observers to analyse myth and religion. Broadly, these approaches may stem from the psychoanalytic approach to dream analysis initiated by Freud or from the theorising of myth by Jung. In *Other Peoples’ Myths* (1988) Wendy Doniger
O’Flaherty succinctly outlines some of the more significant attempts by Westerners to “establish the reality of myth”. O’Flaherty (1988:153) provides a link between Jungian and Freudian terms of analysis:

Freud has showed us how we incorporate into our dreams the seemingly meaningless details of daily life, and upon them whenever they will bear the weight, we hang our fantasies. The details of the dream are the manifest content, which corresponds to what Jung called the manifestational aspect of myth; the fantasies are the latent content – or, in a myth, the archetypal aspect. Levi-Strauss has showed us how we incorporate into our myths the seemingly meaningless scraps of cultural bricolage and hang our paradoxes upon them. And Eliade has demonstrated that the banality of myth, like the banality of evil that Hannah Arendt taught us to acknowledge, is an intrinsic part of its power.

In Orientalist Constructions of India (1986) Ronald Inden looks at the relationship between knower and known and, inter alia, discusses parallels that can be drawn between Freud’s work on dream analysis and the subsequent attempts of others to interpret Indian texts. Inden (1986:412-13) notes the distortions within Freudian dream analysis and the like distortions that might be observed in the application of similar approaches to Indian texts:

Freud argued that the report a person gives of his dreams is, in fact, a distorted representation of reality. It is a distorted representation both of the external world of the dreamer and of his internal emotional world. The report of a dream, the ‘manifest content’ of a dream text, is a distorted representation of reality because, said Freud, the conscious reasoning which during waking hours represents the outer world to itself has, during sleep, ceased to do this. It has, at the same time, also lessened its grip on the unconscious emotions. The rational or intellectual operations of the mind are, as a result, pushed this way and that by its own irrational wishes. Although Freud formulated this idea of a reasoning faculty dominated by desires in relation to dreams, he later extended it to cover not only the waking representations of neurotics but the prescientific religious (or animist) mind in general. It is here, of course, that the subject matter of Freud and the Orientalist overlap. Many Indologists would no doubt reject the more extravagant claims that Freud made about myth and religion but that should not obscure the similarities of their discourses. I am not making use of Freud’s theory of dream interpretation here because I think his theory is the correct one either for the interpretation of dreams or of Indian texts. Indeed, some of the features that make it difficult to accept Freud’s theory are also, at the level of major presuppositions, the very features of Indological discourse itself that I wish to criticise.

When Inden goes on to discuss specifically the precise nature of the distortions attributed to Indian thought in Indological accounts he looks also at the primary mental activities of ‘condensation’ and ‘displacement’ and the subsequent ‘secondary revision’, which in Freudian analysis account for the distortions of dream-texts, a discussion that incorporates the applications of
synecdoche, metonymy and metaphor. Inden then returns (1986:414) to the
Indological to offer a parallel of such primary distortions in an example that he
traces specifically through the work of Renou, but which suggests a wider alert
in Indological readings:

The Indian classification of rituals, as Renou construes it, is not a scientific,
rational one. The product of a mind that leaps between the extremes of an occult
mysticism and a finicky scholasticism, it is characterised by both of the forms of
distortion described by Freud. All of the rites are but variations, one recalls, of a
single archetype. The elements of one type of rite appear again and again in other
types. The classification scheme is, in other words, overdetermined,
uneconomical, and incoherent in its organization.

Inden goes on to look at Freud’s use of ‘secondary revision’ or
‘secondary elaboration’, an operation subsequent to the primary distortions of
condensation and displacement, which “provides the confused dream text with
an orderly façade” and Inden’s own application of those frames to Indological
writings. Inden (1986:414-15) says:

Just as passages of comment frame those of descriptions in an Indological
account, so those of secondary revision frame, in turn, the commentative aspects
of those texts. The condensation and displacement which the Indologist attributes
to the Indian mind in the characterising passages of his text make the thoughts
and practices of the ancient Indian seem alien and stress his difference from the
man of the West. Secondary revision in an account of South Asia goes just the
other way. It makes the strange and incoherent seem rational or normal. It is,
however, not attributed to the Indian mind. The Indologist takes credit for
providing the orderly façade for Indian practices. Here the scientific theorist - the
physical anthropologist, the racial historian, historical materialist, comparative
mythologist, social psychologist, historian of religion, structural-functional-
anthropologist, Parsonsian sociologist, or development economist – truly comes
into his own. One might also add the theories of the psychoanalyst to the list, for
does he not also do the same thing? The difference, of course, is that he claims
his ordering of the patient’s material to be rational and not merely a
rationalisation.

Nearly all of these secondary revisions tend to be monistic, to concentrate
on one sort of ‘cause’ or ‘factor’ to the exclusion of others. Which is to say that
they are also almost invariably reductionist. Philosophical thought is reduced to
the mythical, religion to psychology, the social or political to the economic, the
cultural to the biological. The most important of these rationalisations for
Indological discourse entail what I refer to as ‘naturalist’ assumptions.
Evolutionism and functionalism, utilitarianism and a modern variant of that,
behaviourism, are some of the strains of naturalism that have held sway in British
and American studies of India.
In his concluding comments on the relationship of Freud to Indology, Inden (1986:421-22) sets out the main reason for his use of Freud’s theory of dream interpretation:

(H)is theory makes quite explicit the discursive principles that have, for the most part, remained implicit in the discipline of Indology. What makes this possible is the fact that both share the same presuppositions about the relationship of knowledge to reality. Both presuppose a duality of knower and known. Both assume that the discourse of the knower, that of the scientist, is a privileged discourse in relation to the knowledges of the known, the Other of the human scientist. For Freud the Other is an Other internal to the West, the neurotic person who is his ‘patient’. The Other of the Indologist is an externalised Other, the civilisation of India. For both the analyst and the philologist, however, the knowledges of those whom they studied were what Foucault refers to as ‘subjugated knowledges’. These comprised, according to him: “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity”\(^{101}\).

Following a Freudian psychoanalytical approach, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (1988:162) takes up and explores further Claude Levi-Strauss’s reference to myths as translations. Levi-Strauss (1988:171) relates the operation of myth as translation:

Mythic thought operates in a unique way, using several codes. Each code brings out latent properties in a given realm of experience, allowing a comparison with other realms – in short, a translation from realm to realm. Imagine a text, difficult to understand in one language, translated into several languages; the combined meaning of all the different versions may prove richer and more profound than the partial, mutilated meaning drawn from each individual version.

O’Flaherty (1988:162) goes further to argue that “we can best understand both our own myths and those of other people by translating them into other myths”. She considers the Jungian assumption that “we can communicate, that alienation isn’t the final human condition, since there is a vast common ground on which we can meet, not only rationally, but aesthetically intuitively, emotionally”\(^{102}\); and also an ambition of Levi-Strauss\(^{103}\): “to discover the conditions in which systems of truths become mutually convertible and therefore simultaneously acceptable to several different subjects”. O’Flaherty (1988:162) then articulates her own extension from these positions:

My rather more modest ambition would be to discover the conditions in which systems of meaning become, not mutually convertible but at least simultaneously acceptable – or, at the very least, sympathetically comprehensible – to several different subjects.
For to understand myths we must draw them back into that internal hub where our own personal reality, our own nature, intersects with the myths preserved by tradition, by culture. This provides, in passing, a way of translating myths, but it also provides a means of addressing the far more serious problem of translating reality, of establishing a vocabulary with which to understand what goes on in the heads of other people – or fish. Myth in this sense is both solitary and communal: solitary, in that the experiences that myths tell about are among the most private and highly personal; communal, in that they are experienced by all of us. Myths provide a conceptual system through which we may understand and thereby construct a universal reality.

O’Flaherty (1988:163) goes on to look at the changing meaning of myth across time and space:

The belief in the interconnection between myths is one that I find acceptable only in a rather sharply modified version: there is indeed a common thread running through the great myths of the world, and it does arise out of the common experience of humankind. But the meaning of that experience, and therefore the meaning of the myth, changes constantly across the barriers of time and space. In myth, as in life, the Buddha’s dictum holds true: all is impermanence, anicca.
Notes

Chapter One

1 I have adopted this term from Zarrilli’s definitions, provided as footnotes to his article “A Tradition of Change: The Role of Patrons and Patronage in the Kathakali Dance Drama” (1992a):

Performance determinants are specific “fields of action” which collectively create performance. Such “fields of action” include those that create sounds, visual images, and/or serve as fundamental constraints to other determinants. Major constraint for performative fields of action is a text or scenario. In Kathakali the text is an important determinant, and performative determinants or fields of action which “present” text include vocal music, percussive music, actors’ sounds; performers’ in-body movements and actions (including independent systems of movement such as choreography, hand gestures, facial gestures, character or interpretative gestures); visual means of presentation in the form of costumes and make-up; and finally physical means of staging (space). Each determinant is presented in performance through sets of associated techniques and conventions.

2 Panikkar (1993:32) says: “In the ritualistic content of its performance and the Sanskrit content of its literary text, Ramanattom was at variance with Krishnattom with its style more plain and rustic, vigorous and fast rhythms in the dance steps. The make-up and costume were also comparatively gross. Rama and Lakshmana had their faces painted blue, and demons and monkeys wore facemasks. The headgear was made of palm sheath with designs painted on it, while the torso was bare. The actors sang on their own; with the horizontal drum called maddalam and the gong called chenkala keeping rhythm.

3 Panikkar (1993:32) says: “Ramanattom spread to other parts of Kerala over a period of three decades. During this time, local performing troupes called kaliyogams were established in various places. When it came to Vettom in north Kerala, the Tampuran there effected certain improvements. The blue colour for the faces of Rama and Lakshmana was substituted with emerald green, and gilded headgear was provided. The masks used for monkeys and demons were put aside and instead designs were painted on the face. Beards, costumes for the body, and the special skirts were introduced. The actors were divested of the duty of singing and communicated solely through gestures. Two people were exclusively employed for singing, and the chenda, a drum, and cymbals called ilattalam were now employed as further accompaniments to the maddalam and the gong.”

4 Panikkar (1993:43) says: “Several other institutes came up during the period of the establishment of the Kerala Kalamandalam, imitating its style of operation. Two notable ones are the Unnayi Varrier Kalanilayam, at Irinjalakkuda, and P.S.V.Natyasangham, at Kottakkal. Several others exist without having yet made an impact.”

5 Lipsey in his biography, Coomaraswamy (1977b:198), says “…probably his most perspicacious critic throughout the 1930’s and 1940’s was professor Meyer Schapiro, much of whose work has been in mediaeval art


7 This nationalist movement urged the boycotting of imports from England while encouraging Indian manufactures…It signified the movement to purchase only Indian goods and to encourage local industries, which quickly blossomed into concern for every aspect of national culture: education, religion, language, dress, art. Initiated as political weapons in a particular crisis, boycott and swadeshi became means non-cooperation with the British in every field. (Lipsey 1977b:67, 77).

8 Lipsey quotes from Coomaraswamy’s Art and Swadeshi, 1911:2.

9 Coomaraswamy’s (1977:91) note: “‘Alpana’ drawings are outstanding examples of “fine art” within the customary definitions of the category; being at once exalted in theme, astonishing in virtuosity, and, practically speaking, useless.”
Chapter Two

10 Such scenes of disembowelling were present in ritual performances as well as in Ezthurathachan’s poem and both may have provided the source for the staging of the scene in Kathakali (Zarrilli, 1984:45), but this account reads like an exact description of the action portrayed in Kathakali’s Durvodhana Vada.


13 In my description of the worlds of Kathakali I have chosen to adopt the term “appreciators”, which they themselves currently use widely, for those elitists that consider themselves more “cultured” in its performance determinants. In contrast, I use “spectators” for those who might be seen as being less “cultured”, that is, more popular and not belonging to the orthodox elite.

14 I cite here the extensive discussion of terms that Zarrilli (1994:85-86) provides in “APPENDIX B – Lokadharmi and Natyadharmi”:

Following the detailed etymological and historical study of Vidya Niwas Misra and Prem Lata Sharma, lokadharmi as applied to Indian arts and drama in particular might best be translated as the “ordinary” or “concrete,” i.e., that from which the “extraordinary” or “ideal” (natyadharmi) is elaborated, abstracted, transformed, and/or distilled:

The evolution of natyadharmi itself is based on what is happening in this loka. Any abstraction for that matter presupposes something concrete. Moreover a natyadharmi (an ideational presentation) is aimed at giving the essence of what one finds at the concrete level and is necessitated by the impossibility of presenting the whole activity of all times and spaces in a physically bound time and space...[The] mutual interaction of these two has to be ensured, so that the performance continues to be a process, rather than a dead end, and still it has to be ideational in order to be able to communicate, to people of all time and space

Since these two terms appeared as early as the Natyasastra with reference to drama, they have received considerable attention among scholars of Sanskrit drama and Indian performing arts. Focussing more specifically on the terms used in the Natyasastra, scholars such as Kapila Vatsyayan translate dharmi as “modes” or “conventions” and lokadharmi and natyadharmi as “realistic...or suggestive” conventions; hence natyadharmi becomes the “stylised” mode of enacting drama and lokadharmi the “realistic.” Similarly V.Raghavan translates the terms as “realism” and “idealism.”

Misra and Sharma take account of these more specific uses but manage to keep their account of the terms open-ended. They conclude their study by asserting that Loka is a generalised concept of space filled primarily with activity of various kinds now and here, but secondarily of possible transformations at a higher or lower level. It can neither be equated with the world nor with the common people, nor with the sphere of direct perceptions or the manifest, nor the folk or rustic against the elite; nor the oral unformed tradition as against the codified written tradition nor the real as against the ideal. And yet it covers all of these ranges of meaning interrelated to each other. Unfortunately, the term loka has been devalued during the last 150 years in India as folk, and has come to mean a subterranean flow of collective consciousness forgotten and rediscovered...

15 Among the interviews that I carried out with spectators arriving for performances of Kathakali, explicit reference is made to “Santanagopalam and the suffering in it...” by Thailambal, a Brahmin housewife - see “Sacralising Sorrow” in Chapter Seven.

16 A complete version of questions and responses is provided under the heading “On the Elusive ‘Kathakalic’ Factor: T.S.Madhavan Kutty” in Chapter Seven.

17 There is a long literary tradition of Malayalam, with an extensive corpus of poetry, commentary and so on, which makes it very difficult for an outsider to master the language in a short time. The performance texts of Kathakali are largely drawn on the classical Hindu epics and the Puranas and access to them is, for me, necessarily through English translations from Sanskrit and Malayalam and through the English commentaries of others who have the specialised language skills to unfold particular areas.
Singer in the same opening remarks (1992:23) acknowledges that “It was very difficult to set up any criteria that would allow me to differentiate a ritual from a performance. I finally gave up and decided to call them all “ cultural performances”.

**Chapter Three**

Bolland (1988) and Pilaar (1993) translate *Bhutas* as “imps” though the more literal translation would seem to be “ghosts”.

**Chapter Four**

Franke and Chasin (1992:72) make the note that although the Nairs are formally thought of as Sudras by India specialists, the social and economic roles of some Nair sub-castes such as the Kiriyatil include those of Kshatriyas in other parts India.

Tarlekar’s (1991:247) note: “Shri K. Bharatha Iyer states that when a Namputiri woman is suspected of adultery, she is at once placed under ‘suspicion’ till her guilt or innocence is proved. A trial is conducted by competent judges drawn from the members of Namputiri society. When guilt is proved she is out-casted. The judges decide the period which is the interval between the date of her offence and the date she is out-casted. An issue, during this period, if a male, becomes a Cakyar, if a female - Nanyar.”

According to Tarlekar’s (1991:247) traditional account of the origins of the *Natyasastra* (1991:2), “The NS describes the origin of Natya in the first chapter. God Brahm created the Natyaveda for the benefit of all the Varnas, (Sarvavarnika) as the Sudra could not be instructed in the Veda. The four components of this Veda were adopted from the four earlier vedas, namely, the Recitation from the Rigveda, the Song from the Samaveda, the Abhinyas (the histrionics) from the Yajurveda and the Rasas (sentiments) from the Artharvaveda. The Upavedas were also connected with it.

“The Kuttu has religious character. The Actors are under fast till the performance is over. The performance is to be held only in temples. The caste Hindus alone are allowed to witness it. It is a visual sacrifice to please the deity.”(Tarlekar, 1991: 248)

Gayatri Mantra came to be regarded as “a mystic formula of universal power, constituting the most sacred verse in Hindu scriptures… It is the duty of every Brahmin to repeat it mentally every morning and evening and also on certain other occasions.”(Walker, 1983, vol.1, p.384-5). This mantra is closely associated with investiture to the sacred thread worn by Brahmins (Stevenson, 1971).

D. Appukuttan Nair, in his article “A Three-Dimensional Poetic Art” in *Kathakali – The Art of the Non-Worldly*, (eds) D.Appukuttan Nair and K.Ayyappa Paniker, Marg Publications, 1993, Bombay, pp.5-18, compares and contrasts the *dicta* of the *Natyasastra* with the adopted practices of Kathakali.

These plays do not figure amongst the most commonly performed thirty-six plays that are nominated by Bolland (1980) or in the very comprehensive bibliography of *Attakkatha* compiled by K.Ayyappa Paniker (1993). According to Zarrilli (1992:127; 1984:280, 283) *Ayyappa Caritam* was authored by, Sri C.A.Varier, an individual highly placed in company management with the P.S.V.Natyasangham of Kottakkal, Kerala, in 1967, as part of a self-conscious effort to include in its repertory plays which reach a more general mass audience. Zarrilli notes a second play, Manakanda Vijayam, also about Lord Ayyappan, authored by T.Krishnan Varier in 1969, and introduced to the repertory of the same company at Kotakkal, which proved to be popular with temple audiences in the area.

The authors’ note: “The terms come from joining together two separate words: *kolam*, which refers to the physical form of the deity, either in the shape of an idol or the fully costumed performer, and *karran*, which means man”( Ashley and Holloway, in Richmond et al, 1990: 135).

Richmond places the earliest discovered Sanskrit plays at about the first century A.D., by which time Sanskrit theatre was “already fully formed and highly sophisticated”(in Richmond, et al, 1990:32).
29 On this issue, Tarlekar refers to Hillebrandt and Konow, respectively, who argue, instead, that there existed a popular form of mime which, along with the epic, lies at the bottom of Sanskrit drama.

30 In relation to the arguably popular nature of the Natyasastra, Byrski (1974) opens up the political questions of attribution, validation and appropriation, when he contrasts the opinions of Shekhar, Keith and Gosh respectively. He does so in a discussion which makes reference to a comparison of “the fate of the actors to that of the Vedic rathakaras who were Brahmans at first and only later became Sudras” (Byrski, 1974:7-9). His foremost objection is directed at attempts in the efforts of both Gosh and Shekhar “to present the mythological account of the NS as a camouflage for the unholy although commendable machinations of Sudras or non-Aryans in order to get the Aryan recognition of Natya. This approach finds little support in NS and elsewhere” (Byrski, 1974:7-9). I refer here to Byrski’s dispute only by way of reference to the tensions that have long existed between popular and elitist perspectives, even within arguments regarding attribution and legitimisation in relation to the compilation of the Natyasastra itself; and also within its subsequent interpretation. The claims of elitists and classicists to authority based on the Natyasastra do not always acknowledge the contentious nature of attempts to exclude notions of populism from its discourses.

31 Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, in Folklore of Kerala (1991:118-19) says: “In the Kudiyattam performance, the Vidooshaka of the Sanskrit plays developed into a key figure mainly to convey the purport of the plays to the common man (sic). The language used by Vidooshaka was known as Tamil which was the name used to denote the local dialect. Gradually Vidooshaka began to recite verses uttered in Sanskrit by the hero of the play. This language consisting of Sanskrit and Malayalam came to be known as Manipravala and many scholars think that these slokas formed the beginnings of the Manipravala school of poetry which became an important branch of Malayalam literature between the 11th and 15th centuries.

32 “Prakrit, ‘natural’ language, as distinct from the ‘artificial’ medium of Sanskrit. The term is applied to the whole family of vernacular forms of speech that developed from the Proto-Aryan Adibhasha or Adiprakrit, influenced by dialectical variations found in the different localities of India. These forms evolved as a result of the gradual association of the Aryans with the indigenous non-Aryan tribes. According to Keith, “The factor of race-mixture must have played an important part in the creation of the Prakrits”.

The Prakrits were not an offspring of Sanskrit, but grew up naturally from the people, side by side with Sanskrit, which itself owed much to them. They were the vehicle of communication in everyday life, and continued to be spoken and to evolve after Sanskrit was already a dead tongue. They were the direct source of the modern Indo-Aryan languages. (Benjamin Walker, Vol.2, 1983:232)

33 Although these constructions follow closely the canonic details provided by the Natyasastra, Richmond (in Richmond, et al, 1990:96) points to some minor variations to the dimensions and shape of the space reserved for actors in the temple theatres of Kerala.

34 “The aim of human existence is diverse and is considered as having a fourfold direction. These four goals are (1) Artha, wealth or material power which is the domain of politics, state-craft, economics and so on; (2) kama, or physical love, the domain of kamasastra, or erotics; dharma, or righteousness, concerned with ethics and law; and moksha, or salvation through spiritual knowledge, the domain of religion and yoga; hence moksha is spoken of as the paramartha or ‘highest wealth’” (Walker, 1983, vol.1.,p.343).

35 Richmond tells us that “the term acting (abhinaya) literally means ‘carrying toward,’ implying that the actor is one who brings a performance to the spectators”(Richmond, et al, 1990:40).

36 Tarlekar (1991:40) makes reference to the “sculptural representations of many dance panels from the 2nd century B.C. onwards” which attest to the popularity of minor forms of drama. He goes on to refer to a variety of such minor forms not mentioned by Bharata, which give pre-eminence to music and dance.
Tarlekar (1991:248-49) here treats “Kuttu” as being comprised of Prabandham Kuttu, which is enacted by the Cakyar, Nanyar Kuttu, in which the (female) Nanyar replaces the Cakyar, and Kuttiyattam, which is his primary concern in a discussion of the Natyasastra.

In a footnote reference to his Appendix (E,iv), Tarlekar (1991:248) says: Narayana Bhatta wrote prabhandas specially for the use of Cakyars, for the presentation of Kuttu. Apart from the high literary merit, they are composed with a view to help the Cakyars to bring in various topics without giving the impression that they are extraneous matter.

Panikkar (1991:119-20) says: The Manipravala Champus, just like the Sanskrit ones, consisted of verses and prose but the prose pieces of Manipravalam Champus were in fact very much similar in structure to the ballads of Malayalam. They could be recited just like the “Thoittam Pattus” and the “Patayani Songs”.

As a personal reference point from outside this performance culture, I was struck by the similarity between the mastery displayed and the humour engendered through this technique and some of the techniques similarly employed on stage by the Italian writer/performer and Noble Prize-winner Dario Fo.

“But the element of sanctity associated with Krishnanattom has helped to maintain it free from changes during a long period of 333 years, and the (former) restriction that it could be performed only in temples and palaces owned by the author’s family delayed popularity for this attractive art form for a long time” (Raja, 1988:11-12).

Schechner (1976b:210) draws a “dialectical-dyadic continuum linking efficacy to entertainment – both are present in all performances, but in each performance one or the other dominates”.

Zarrilli (1984:49) provides this calculated estimate of historically undated writing of these plays.

Within my inter-textual references, these mono-actors bear some correspondence with the itinerant mediaeval story-tellers, minstrels and players of European tradition.

Bolland (1988:144) notes that there is disagreement amongst scholars of the history of Malayalam literature but cites these dates from Kathakali Rangam by K.P.S.Menon.

Chapter Five

“British Malabar played a leading part in the National movement which culminated in the achievement of Independence by India in 1947. The Indian National Congress founded in 1885 had its adherents in Malabar from very early days” (Menon, 1991:294).

“Sanskrit, the principal of the post-Vedic languages of India, is regarded as a sacred tongue ‘current among the gods’”(p.352); “The man in the street did not understand Sanskrit (…) Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that the artificial, stilted forms of Sanskrit grammar could ever have been used as a medium of popular expression in India (…)Modern Hindu reformers have frequently (…) advocated the abandonment of Sanskrit as a vehicle of thought expression. As Rammohan Roy put it, “The Sanskrit language, so difficult that almost a lifetime is necessary for its acquisition, is well known to have been for ages a lamentable check to the diffusion of knowledge, and the learning concealed under this almost impervious veil is far from sufficient to reward the labour of acquiring it (p.355)” (Walker, 1983, Vol.II).

“Malayalam emerged as a language distinct from Tamil in the 9th century A.D., but literary works of historical value are available only from the 12th or 13th century.” (A. Sreedhara Menon, 1991:17) “It is not between Tamil and Malayalam alone that we find affinities in respect of grammar, syntax and vocabulary, we find the same in respect of all the languages of the stock: Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada and Telugu…If the affinity between Malayalam and Tamil is more pronounced, the reason must be sought for elsewhere - in the unbroken continuity of their contacts, historical and regional - and not in a parent-child relationship” (P.K.Parameswaran Nair, 1977:5).
Dravidian, strictly the name of a group of South Indian languages with no particular ethnic connotation, and today used to include all peoples speaking these languages, namely, Tamil, Kanarese, Telugu, and Malayalam, besides the ‘uncultivated’ Dravidian tongues like Tulu and Kodaga” (Walker, 1983, Vol. II, p.299).


Dirks asserts, on the basis of his study of caste and kingship in Tamil culture in Southwest India, that the “Colonial hegemony took a variety of indirect forms. In Nineteenth century India, hegemony worked through the successes of colonial contradictions. Because, for example, honours became so genuinely sought after and fetishised, because property had certain real if often evanescent advantages, because law provided a discourse and an institutional arena of such seemingly independent power and drama, many actors in the system were distracted from the fundamental transformations being brought about by the demise of the old regime” (Dirks, 1993:57).

“The principal administrative mediation for indirect rule by the second half of the Nineteenth century was not the Raja himself but rather a number of powerful Brahmin bureaucrats” (Dirks, 1993:359).

**Chapter Six**


Both Pilaar (1993:58) and Bolland (1980: 26) make use of this translation of Bhutas as “Imps” but a more literal one, in the context of Siva, “the destroyer of death”, would be “ghosts”.

Pilaar’s (1993:58) note: “hunters, forest dwellers”.

According to Tarlekar’s (1991:247) traditional account of the origins of the *Natyasastra* (1991:2), “The NS describes the origin of Natya in the first chapter. God Brahman created the Natyaveda for the benefit of all the Varnas, (Sarvavarnika) as the Sudra could not be instructed in the Veda.


**Chapter Seven**


The *Mahabharata* tells the story of the descendants of Bharata, the eponymous founder of the great Indian families of yore reaching its climax in the war of succession between the Kauravas and the Pandavas.”(Walker, Vol.2, 1983:8)

“RAMAYANA, “the goings of Rama”, is one of the two great epics of India, the other being the *Mahabharata*. It is said to have been composed by the sage Valmiki. The incidents related in it precede the *Mahabharata* by about one hundred and fifty years, but the epic was compiled after the *Mahabharata*.”( Walker, Vol.2, 1983:287)

Krishna is the most celebrated deity of the Hindu pantheon. His life story is told in the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Purana* (especially in its Hindi translation known as the *Premsagar* or Ocean of Love) and in the *Harivamsa*. The *Bhagavadgita* is supposed to express his own doctrine, as recorded verbatim from his utterance. He is worshipped as an independent god in his own right, but regarded as the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. The latter deity assumed the form of Krishna in order to destroy the tyrant Kamsa, son of Ugrasena of Mathura.…. Many of the names of Vishnu are also used for Krishna. Among the names applied specifically to Krishna are: Balaji, ‘boy’; Damodara, ‘rope-belly’; Dasara, belonging to the tribe of Dasarah, a sub-tribe of the Yadavas; Dvarakanath, ‘lord of Dvaraka’; Gopala, ‘cowherd’, with its variations, e.g.,

61 This rather “topi” style head dress “is believed to have been copied from the French troops fighting in India in the 17th century” (Bolland, 1980:6).

62 This question has been condensed here rather than repeatedly reported at length. It originally consisted of two parts: “Do you think you are better able to enjoy it when you see more and more Kathakali over the years? If yes, then why?”. It was so designed not to leave the respondents on the first part, but rather to lead them on and provide the widest possible spectrum for an eventual response to the second part, which relates to the factors involved in their progression.

63 Kumar’s insistence upon stories of a fitting nature for performance in Kathakali provides a strong point of contention in the dispute between secularism and fundamentalism, aspects of which are discussed (in Chapter 6). In the views of Iyyamkode Sreedharan, dogmatic assertions on what is proper or not to Kathakali performance characterises “aesthetic fundamentalism” and it is from that viewpoint that he encounters greatest opposition to the introduction of secular themes to Kathakali.

64 The term artiste, rather than artist, is widely used in Kerala to convey the cachet of the performing arts.

65 Kottayath Thampuram, 1645 - 1716. (Bolland, 1980:26)

66 Manava Vijayan (Peoples’ Victory) is by Iyyamkode Sreedharan whose views are expounded in an interview reported in Chapter Six in the discussion of The Politics of the Popular.

67 “Ayurveda” (‘life knowledge’), the science of health was regarded as one of the Upavedas, closely associated with the Arthava-veda. It owed much to aboriginal traditions and later to the Persians, Greeks and Arabs. In its broadest sense it embraces all aspects of well being, physical, mental and to some extent spiritual, its main object being ays, long life, and arogya, diseaselessness. In practice it covers the study of the cause, symptoms, diagnosis and cure of disease.” (Walker, Vol.1, 1983:104)

68 The program on this occasion was Baka Vadha, by Kottayath Thampuran (1645-1716): “When the Kauravas were young men, they became very jealous of their cousins the Pandavas, who were living with them in the city of Hastinapura. Durvodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, hatched a plot to have the Pandavas burned alive. Having persuaded his blind father, Dhrtarashtra, to prevail upon the Pandavas to live at Varanavata, he had a fine palace built for them which was constructed of highly inflammable material. His idea was that after they had settled down in the palace, it would be set on fire whilst they were asleep. But the Pandavas were forewarned of this nefarious plan and escaped from the palace by an underground passage. Thereafter they lived for sometime in a forest, and later in the village of Ekachaka, disguised as Brahmins.” (Bolland, 1988:26)

69 “ABHINAYAM : The art of dramatic expression through words, facial expressions or gestures.” (Menon, 1979:1)

70 “PADAM: Musical composition in three parts, pallavi, anupallavi and charanams. A padam is addressed by one character to another. Attakatha (literary composition for Kathakali) is largely composed of Padams.” (Menon, 1979:41)

71 “RAVANA, son of Visravas, was the mightiest and most formidable of rakshasa kings. In a campaign against his half-brother, Kubera, god of wealth, Ravana defeated him, captured his aerial chariot Pushpaka, and usurped his kingdom of Lanka. He proceeded to embellish the new capital with many watch-towers, forts, beautiful buildings, public gardens and palaces, and its citizens showed every evidence of wealth, prosperity and happiness… Ravana’s concupiscence was insatiable. From the serpent kingdom of Bhogavati he bore away the wife of the Naga Vasuki. He seduced his own brother’s wife, the apsara Rhamba. He even trespassed
on Indra’s heaven where he ravaged the nymph Punji-Kashtala, and was cursed by Brahma to die a hideous death if he continued his offences. Ravana’s next exploit was the abduction of Sita which brought about the fulfilment of the curse.” (Walker, Vol.2, 1983:290-1)

72 “VESHAM: Role or the assumed personality of a character in a drama with the specific make-up and costume.” (Menon, 1979:65)

Chapter Eight

73 I refer here to the permeating of the secular by the sacred in the daily routines of devout Hindus. The iconography and the mythic narratives that are drawn from the epic and Puranic literature are popularised in temples, household prayer rooms, on the calendars of barbers shops and offices, in scholastic literature, comic books, television programs and a wide variety of live performance genres. Devotional attitude often provides a strong inter-textual reference to performance semiosis (See Chapter Nine).

74 To provide a succinct and by no means comprehensive historical review of relevant dynamics I draw on the report of United States academics Franke and Chasin, “Kerala – Development through radical reform”(1992), which was published in collaboration with The Institute for Food and Development Policy, San Francisco. During the years 1986-87 the authors conducted research in Kerala in collaboration with the Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum.

75 The Kerala Kalamandalam is the State Educational Centre for Performing Arts. This position is widely regarded as a “political appointment” and the prerogative rests with successive governments.

76 When Iyyamkode Sreedharan insists that his modifications to Kathakali are not changing the essential structure of Kathakali, I take him to be referring to structure in terms of the complex organisation of all of the distinct sub-units of text and/or dance/acting which are analysed by Zarrilli (1989:219ff.) In Zarrilli’s exposition of “The Total Performance Structure and the Score”(ibid, p.249) he has this to say: “While Kathakali’s performance structure includes all of the distinct sub-units examined above, the total performance flows naturally from one sub-unit to another. The characteristic function of each structural unit is the inclusion of opportunities for elaboration by one or more artists. These artistic elaborations, performed as solo insets by a vocal artist elaborating on a sloka, collectively as with the padas, or with the focus on the actor as in the descriptive attam, are obvious reasons for Kathakali’s complex structure and all-night duration”.

77 According to Bolland (1980:6), this head -dress is believed to have been copied from the helmets worn by the French troups fighting in India in the 17th century.

78 “Kalasham: a dance composition punctuating the stanzas (pallavi, anupallavi and charanam) of a padam during the performance.” (Menon,1979:17)

79 For Message of Love, the make-up typing of characters is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Make-up Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sri Krishna</td>
<td>Paccha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Christ</td>
<td>Minukku (Rishi, with beard)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Thomas</td>
<td>”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohammed</td>
<td>”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caliph</td>
<td>Minukku</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propagandist</td>
<td>”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revivalists of all religions</td>
<td>Chuvanna Tadi (Red Beard)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Fundamentalism</td>
<td>”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

80 “Padayani or Padeni is a kind of religious ritualistic dance performed periodically in the Bhagavati temples of Central Kerala; it has been in vogue since ancient times. The belief underlying this ritual is that its performance will protect the whole village or town where it is performed from fatal epidemics like Small-pox or Cholera.” (Vena, 1990:55)

81 Chendar: Cylindrical drum, held vertically and played with sticks.

82 Maddalam: Cylindrical drum, held horizontally and played with the hands.
Chutti: The ridge of rice flour and white paper which forms a frame for the pacca and katti make-up.

“Kuttampalam: The temple of dance-drama; the structure built within the compound walls of a temple, according to the rules of Natyasastra, for the performance of Kutiyattam”. (Menon, 1979:8)
The Kerala Kalamandalam has a very large Kuttampalam, built strictly in accordance with the traditional guidelines, and standing within the precincts of the new Kalamandalam campus.

Chapter Nine

Guruvayoor is the site of a large, renowned temple that is patronised by devotees of Krishna and of Krishnanattom performances that are given inside the temple. Access to the temple is restricted to Hindus.

Within the broadest parameters of Hindu teaching, such a view has been promoted by some outstanding teachers, who have interpreted Vedic philosophies to a contemporary world, such as Shivananda, the mother house of whose ashrams is located in Rishikesh (U.P), but has branches all around the world. His teachings find a place for Lord Buddha and Lord Christ alongside Lord Krishna.

I refer here to the Hindu notion of soul as Atma which is Brahman, a fragment of Paramatman, in self-realisation, a notion which is central to the teaching of the Upanishads and Vedanta (Walker, vol.II, 1983:425)

“Kuchella Vritta. By Muringoor Sankara Potti (1851-1914). This story brings out one of Krishna’s most endearing traits - his accessibility to even the most humble. In the days when he was educated under Guru Sandipani (as related in the play Guru Dakshana), Krishna and Kuchela were fellow pupils and became great friends. (Kuchela’s real name was Sudama, but he was called Kuchela because of the rags he wore.) After leaving Sandipani’s hermitage, they parted company: Krishna went to his palace at Dwaraka and Kuchela to his humble hut. In the course of time Kuchela raised a large family; though poor, he led a pious life. His wife persuaded him to go to Dwaraka to seek Krishna’s assistance.” (Boland, 1988:74)

“Rajasuya. By Karthika Tirunal (1724-1798). Krishna and his older brother Balarama were in the Sudharma Council Hall one day when a messenger arrived with a petition from ‘more than 20,000 kings’ who had been imprisoned by the wicked Jarasandha, in which they appealed to Krishna to rescue them. Just then, sage Narada entered, inviting Krishna to Indraprastha, where Dharmaputra, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, was intending to perform the Rajasuya ceremony. This posed a dilemma for Krishna as to whom he should attend first - the imprisoned kings or the invitation of his relative. As the Rajasuya could only be performed after all of the other kings had been vanquished, Krishna set out to discuss the problem with Dharmaputra.

Having agreed that Jarasandha was the chief and most powerful enemy, Krishna, accompanied by Bhima and Arjuna, all disguised as Brahmins, proceed to Maghada, the country ruled by Jarasandha. Bhima eventually destroyed Jarasandha, and the three then set off to attend Dharmaputra’s Rajasuya, to which all the celebrated kings had been invited. Sisupala, one of the invited kings, disapproved of the honours which were paid to Krishna and started hurling abuses at him. In the pandemonium that followed, Arjuna - who was extremely angry - challenged Sisupala, but before they could come to blows, Krishna took up his divine weapon Sudarsana and slew Sisupala.” (Boland, 1988:29)

NALA, king of Nishada, the story of whose love for Damayanti is one of the most touching in the Mahabharata. He is described as brave, handsome, virtuous, skilled in arms and the management of horses, but addicted to gambling.” (Walker, 1983:113)


“‘Bhakti, ‘attachment’, or fervent devotion to god. The term stems from the root bhaj, ‘partake of’ and originally implied participating in a rite. (…) Bhakti has no need of knowledge, for the main obstacle is not ignorance but unbelief. One should therefore abandon all notions of getting to ‘know’ god by mental process or
meditation. One should relinquish all consideration of actions supposed to yield merit or demerit, for this can reduce one’s trust in god’s grace and love… (Walker, 1983:138-9)

95 Sankara or Sankaracharya (788-838) is generally regarded as the foremost of Vedantic philosophers who espoused non-dualism.

Chapter Ten

96 Zarrilli’s Chapter 6, “Kathakali Performance Structure: Analysis” (1984:217ff) provides an elaborate analysis of the sub-units that systemically provide in integrated structure of Kathakali.

97 This is a reference to the masking and head dress that is conventionally associated with the representation of ghosts in local traditions.

98 The father of my research assistant, Krishnan Kutty, is a devotee of Ayyappa and usually follows an annual pilgrimage, in the appropriate season, to the temple at Sabarimala. This household is not dissimilar to many others in Kerala and further afield in India where annual pilgrimages in honour of Ayyappa are undertaken.


Appendix Four


### Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>anubhava</strong></td>
<td>consequent emotional responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>asthayin</strong></td>
<td>transitory emotional responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avatara</strong></td>
<td>descent of the deity to Earth in incarnate form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>bhava</strong></td>
<td>emotion as an ordinary physical phenomenon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>brahmin</strong></td>
<td>highest of the four orders of caste whose responsibilities were priestly and lay in prayer, worship and religious instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>chakra</strong></td>
<td>discus, weapon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>chutti</strong></td>
<td>is the framing component of make-up that stands rigidly from the actor’s jaw line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>chuvanna tadi</strong></td>
<td>Red Beard) is the make-up type and vile characters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>jati</strong></td>
<td>the more local perspective of categorising according to specific occupation, in contradistinction to the broad idiom of a four-fold <em>varna</em> system of Hindu caste.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>kama-dhenu</strong></td>
<td>a yielding to the spectator of just what he seeks or is capable of understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>kari</strong></td>
<td>(black) is the make-up type of the most gruesome figures in Kathakali: the demonesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>katti</strong></td>
<td>(knife) is one of the five main classes of make-up. It designates characters that are arrogant and evil but have a streak of valour in them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>karutta tadi</strong></td>
<td>(black beard) is the make-up type that generally covers primitive forest dwellers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>kirita</strong></td>
<td>golden crown as worn by Shiva.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>kshatria</strong></td>
<td>the second of the four orders of caste whose concerns lay in warfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>kuttampalam</strong></td>
<td>purpose built temple theatres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>lokadharmi</strong></td>
<td>“unmarked”, mundane performance genres dictated by social interaction in the wider, popular culture in contradistinction to <em>natyadharmi</em> “marked” and highly conventionalised performance genres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minukku</strong></td>
<td>(radiant) is the make-up type that Symbolises gentleness and high spiritual qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>moksha</strong></td>
<td>salvation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>mudra</strong></td>
<td>is an elaborate performance language of gesture that is refined to its own system of syntax and grammar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>natyadharmi</strong></td>
<td>“marked” and highly conventionalised performance genres in contradistinction to <em>lokadharmi</em>, “unmarked”, mundane performances dictated by social interaction in the wider, popular culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>paccha</strong></td>
<td>one of the five main classes of make-up, is predominantly green and is used for heroic, kingly and divine types.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>pada</strong></td>
<td>(in contradistinction to slokas) are used to create the “dialogue” portions of the play. They are usually written in the first person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>padmasana</strong></td>
<td>cross-legged posture for sitting in practice of yoga.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>pazhuppu</strong></td>
<td>(ripe) make-up of the Paccha type is not painted the characteristic green of Paccha but rather an orange-red.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>rasa</strong></td>
<td>(juice, flavour) the aesthetic response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>rajasuya</strong></td>
<td>royal consecration and investiture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
rakshasas  a race inimical to humans
samadhi  concentration.
samvatsara  the pattern of the year.
sanatana dharma  immemorial tradition
sarva-varnika  for all castes
sastra  science
sayana pradakshinam  devotional rolling around the shrine.
slokas  are verse forms in couplets, usually written in the third person. They narrate what happens in the dialogue portion of the play. They are composed in particular metrical patterns and set the context for the “action” of dialogue scenes.
sthayins  permanent emotions
sudarsana  Krishna’s divine weapon
sudra  the lowest of the four orders of caste who were in service to the others.
tadi  (beard) make-up type has three subcategories: Chuvanna Tadi (Red), Vella Tadi (White) and Karutta Tadi (Black).
vaisya  the third of the four orders of caste whose responsibilities lay in commerce and husbandry.
varna  is the broad idiom of a four-fold system of Hindu caste in contradistinction to jati, which is the more local perspective of categorising according to specific occupation.
vella tadi  (White Beard) is the make-up type of a higher type of being and is generally represented by Hanuman, the Monkey-god.
vibhava  determinants of emotional response
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>viswarupa</td>
<td>manifestation (of Krishna) in the cosmic form of Vishnu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vrata</td>
<td>popular festivals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vyabhcharin</td>
<td>transitory mental states.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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