

KANYARKALI

A VISUAL DOCUMENTATION

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REPORT OF WORK DONE AT THE END OF THE PROJECT

“KANYARKALI: A VISUAL DOCUMENTATION”

Work done so far can be divided into two major fields. One is performance shooting which took almost two and a half years of time covering almost all the localities of Palakkad district where this performance is being seen. The other field is the research analysis within the evidences and findings collected through interviews with eminent masters of the art as well as hundreds of ordinary performers belonging to different Desoms of these localities. Being a ritualistic performance, Kanyarkali is conducted every year in Bhagavathy temples of South Eastern side of Palakkad during the months of April and May every year. There are more than 35 desoms or performance spots in Palakkad district where this particular art is performed each year. As being new to this field, the investigator has no other option than attending and spending the whole nights at each and every desoms, and with the help of camera technicians record maximum performances. It was really a painstaking job spending whole night, three or four nights at each place. The present investigator has fortunate enough to witness three seasons of performances since this work was started in the month of April 2014.

It came around 45 hours of video being both performances and interviews with masters and performers. Making a film out of such a huge data is another Herculean task. There are different versions of each performance through out the localities. In order to make a standard format, the investigator had to consult with folklorists and media experts. As a result, a final form of documentary is prepared of a length of 62 minutes. The visual documentation has been prepared both in English and Malayalam language addressing different audiences. As a trial of the work done so far and to realize whether there are any mistakes committed during the portrayal, the work has been exhibited to a closed

audience inviting people from areas of visual media, folklore, cultural analysis, folk performance, Kanyarkali artists, etc. They have approved the whole work without any mistakes or misconcepts, and they wanted it to be circulated into a wider audience. The wide appreciation received from that audience gave me confidence to edit further to sharpen my points and to appear before a learned audience.

Following is the detailed script of the project with both voice over and interviews with different experts of Kanyarkali and Folklore.

SCRIPT OF THE DOCUMENTARY

Kanyarkali: Rituals and Theatre

Conceived and Directed by

DR. T. SREEVALSAN

(Voice over) Villages of Kerala are the storehouses of ritualistic art forms.

(Voice over) A variety of complex rituals performed are in the temples of Kerala to propitiate the deities and as fertility rites.

(Voice over) Many of the ritual forms performed after harvest season in the paddy fields of Palakkad during the southern solstice nights, are now vanishing.

Dr. A. K. Nambiar: The main characteristic feature of folk performances of Kerala is that they are performed by different religious as well as caste communities as their expression of identity. For me Kanyarkali is the expression of Nair identity.

(Voice over) Kanyarkali is one of the folk art forms of Kerala which is performed only in Palakkad district. The organic base of this ritualistic art can be seen only in 35 desoms of Alathur and Chittur Taluks.

(Voice over) This area lies between Themmala and Pattikkad (East of Thrissur district) and Vadamala and Walayar (of Palakkad district).

(Voice over) This place was known as 'Cheraman Nadu' in the past.

(Voice over) Historically speaking, this art form confines itself to the four boundaries of Old VengunaduSwaroopa and the territory of Kururnambidi which exists no more.

Dr. Jyothi.: The region between Themmala and Vadamala is known as 'Naduvattam'. Chittur and Alathur Taluks fall under this region. Kanyarkali is performed as a ritual, only in these two Taluks.

Sri. K. Rajan : Towards the end of 19th century and beginning of 20th century, there were two important jurisdictions under British rule. One was Vadamalapuram and the other was Themmalapuram. Vadamalapuram includes the area between Kongad and Palakkad town and its surroundings. Themmalapuram comprises places called Tarur, Kavassery, Vadakkanchery, Mangalam, etc. Pallavur and Pallassena lie in Naduvattam region. Kanyarkali is more prevalent in Naduvattam.

Sri. ShadanananAnikkath : This art form is performed in Bhagavathi Temples after the festival of Vishu in the Malayalam month of Medam as an offering. This is also referred to as 'Nerchakkali', 'Deshakkali' or 'Malamakkali'.

NallattilBalakrishnan Nair: Kanyarkali is an art form performed during four consecutive nights, as an offering to the Goddess. The dances of other artists are performed after the entry of Oracle in the scene. Artists perform their dance under the guidance of an ‘Asan’ and this leader in Kanyarkali is referred to as “Kaliyachan”.

Sri. Thottankara Ramachandran Master: Its origin is not music alone and is an art performed even before the visual media came into existence. It involves everything, like rhythm, orchestra, steps, and humour.

Sri. Vasudev: Kanyarkali is a meeting place of different cultures. There will be “vettuvas” and “Kootans” belonging to kole wetlands, besides, “Chakkiliyas” and “Thottichis” who speak only Tamil hailing from places of Madura and Coimbatore thus representing different castes. We can infer the history of an era from these performances.

(Voice over) Kanyarkali can claim a history of more than five hundred years. Many indications found in “Vattakkali” songs and the oldness of the palm leaves in which they are recorded lead to this conclusion. Although, “Asans” of different villages are of different opinion, there is no dispute about its claim of existence in the olden days.

Sri. ShadanananAnikath: The history of the beginning of this art form is based on a myth related to a man called Kannatharakan, of ‘Pathukuditharaka’ community who brought a sort of an art form from Tamil Nadu, added some Malayalam slokas and performed this art in the temple of KuthanurTheruvass.

NallattilBalakrishnan Nair: The scriptures of this art are in ‘Vattezhuthu’ (an old script) and hence this art form might have existed even before the age of ‘Vattezhuthu’.

KinattinkalRavindranathan Nair: In history, Pallassena was originally known as PallavaSena, the place where the army of Pallava dynasty resided and Pallavur was the place where Pallavas resided. A nearby place called Kollengode is the place where Pallavas made their weapons. The places Pallavur, Pallassena and Kollengode are thus linked to Pallavas. The reason why this art form was confined to Chittur and Alathur Taluks could be related to the presence of Pallavas in that area.

Dr. Jyothi: According to “Kaliyasans” The Zamorins of Calicut had donated 35 paras of land to the Kumaranchidayath family to conduct a festival as well as Kanyarkali at Pulpuramannam situated in Kuzhalmannam. Even today the decision to conduct Kanyarkali is made by the local astrologers, after due deliberations conducted at the entry gate of Kumaranchidayath house since the people of that family are considered as the representatives of the Zamorins. There are references to both Vikramaraja of Vanchipadakkunnalai and Zamorins Manaveda and Manavikrama in the Vattakkali songs who were the rulers of South eastern region of Palakkad. We can also see references in the Kanyarkali songs about Veerakeralan, Ramakorma and Sekharivarma, the kings of Palakkad, besides ‘Thalaichennor’ who ruled as a representative of Zamorin.

(Voice over) There exists different opinions about the origin of the word ‘Kanyarkali’. It seems that the word Kanyarkali is derived from the names of the art forms such as ‘Karnakiyar Kali’, ‘Kaniyaram Kali’, ‘Kaniyatchi Kali’.

Dr. Jyothi: According to the book named “NellikulangaraBhagavathi”, Kanyarkali is performed in memory of Karnaki Devi as well as to please Her. However, there is no historical validation for this argument. If at all this performance was meant to pacify the fury of Goddess Karnaki who settled at Kodungallur, there is no trace of this performance at Kodungallur.

Sri. MadathilKunhikrishnan Nair: ... Even though there is a reference to Karnaki in this song it has not been established that Karnakiyar Kali is Kanyarkali. However there is a possibility, because Karnaki has been referred 700 years back, when this song was composed. This song is only sung in the EdakkaliPanthal.

Sri. ShadanananAnikath: There is no historical reference to Karnaki in Kanyarkali. Neither the historical drama of Kovalan, nor the myth about Karnaki can be seen in the songs of Kanyarkali and hence there is no meaning in calling this as Karnakiyarkali.

Dr. Jyothi: According to Kunjunniraja, the word ‘Kaniyan’ referred to a particular community is derived from the word ‘Ganakan’. Where ever this Kanyarkali is performed there is no presence of this community. We cannot relate Kaniyan community either directly or indirectly to the Kanyarkali.

Sri. ShadanananAnikath: 'Kaniyan' community do not perform or practise this particular art.

Dr. Jyothi: Rice, paddy, coconut, etc. gifted by the local chieftain is known as "Kanyarkollal". Perhaps the word Kanyarkali could have originated from the term Kanyarkollal. Kanyarkali can also be seen as the launch of the harvest festival. Kanyarkali commences only after the ritual of Kanyarkollal. Therefore, Kanyarkali has a deep rooted relation with such an exchange between the chieftain and common people.

Sri. ShadanananAnikath: In Tamil nadu they use the name Kanyarkali for the "Vattakkali" performed by dancing around the grinding stone at the centre where ladies powder 'Nava dhanya' (nine type of cereals).

Dr. Jyothi: It is mentioned in the book 'Keralolpathy' that Parasurama divided Nairs into various units making them responsible for their respective unit and gave authority for its administration and collection of land tax. This led to the claim of heirship of the share of land tax collected. The word 'Kanam' in Malayalam seems to have derived from this transaction. In Tamil, ownership of the land is termed as 'Kaaniyatchi' according to Mr. Logan as described in Malabar Manuel. It is presumed that 'Kaaniyatchikkali' later came to be known as 'Kanyarkali'.

Rituals of Kanyarkali

(Voice over) The announcement of Kanyarkali jointly made by the elders of the Desom and the Master of the art in the presence of the local residents is known as 'Kali Kumbidal'.

(Voice over) Vattakkali, the ritualistic dance of Kanyarkali is performed subsequently.

Sri. KinattinkalRavindranathan Nair: In the following day of the 'Vela'(village festival), vattakkali is played for one round, in front of the Vettakkaruman Deity, the day when the symbolic act of killing the Jackal and the Tiger is performed.

Edakkali

(Voice over) 'Edakkali' is a rehearsal conducted strictly for the same number of days as the actual performance. Sufficient rehearsals are given before Edakkali.

Sri. NallattilBalakrishnan Nair: Edakkali is practiced for four days in a temporary shed at Pathiyattillam for the purpose. Practice, 'Chilambu' (final rehearsal), and the actual performance are the three stages of standard procedure. Edakkali at Pathiyattillom is to be considered as 'Chilambu'.

(Voice over) Before Kanyarkali, Gurupooja and Kalaripooja are performed as rituals in the localities concerned.

Performance Stage

Dr. Jyothi: Even though there is a specially prepared stage for Kanyarkali, the audience are not widely separated. Audience can be seated all around the four sides of the Kali Panthal. The circumference of the performance area is fixed according to Natyasastra as 64 kol. The stage is normally made of nine pillars.

The square stage has eight pillars and one in the middle aside of the rock lamp. The Panthal is decorated using tender palm leaves, May flower (which is known as 'Kalikkonna' in this context) and mango tree leaves. Electrical lamps were not in use in the olden days. There were only one big oil lamp in the centre with the hanging lamps attached to each pillar of the stage. Tubelights, gaslights and petrolmax are in use these days.

Sri. KinattinkalRavindranathan Nair: The eight pillars signify the "Lokapalakas" and "Astadikpalakas" and the centre one, Goddess Sridevi. The Goddess is brought in a procession to the stage after the lamp is lit.

SandhyaKeli

(Voice over) A Keli is performed during the evenings of Kanyarkali in the temple premises as an announcement.

Vattakkali

(Voice over) The ritualistic part of Kanyarkali is called “Vattakkali”. Vattakkali is performed in conformity with Kanyarkali and is a ceremony conducted in front of the temple after the oracle comes in action. Participants under the leadership of their master, pay homage to the Deity and they enter the stage after going around the temple in a procession accompanied by drumbeats, an oil lamp with pointed handle, multipranged torch with long handle, a box carrying divine ashes, sword and the jingling anklet of the Goddess, in the absence of the oracle. The procession then concludes after installing the sword and the ash box in the stage. Vattakkali is the ceremony where the participants sing in praise of Goddess, dancing around the lamp in the stage. Prostration ceremony is then followed after each round played in the process of concluding the drum beat. Participants pay homage to Goddess Earth, the lamp at the centre, musical instruments and finally at the feet of the “Kaliyasana”. Singing of Vattakkali songs of each day commences then.

(Voice over) A Dhoti with a golden border and a turban of similar cloth is the attire of Vattakkali participants. Kaliyasanas wear a garland.

(Voice over) Vattakkali of Kuzhalmannam locality has a distinction where participants enter the stage in a dress similar to the one worn for “Krishnanaattam”.

Sri. C. K. Gopalan: Those artists who wear a crown like cap represent Lord Siva.

(Voice over) They perform Vattakkali with a red silk turban holding a “maathira” stick in their hand.

Sri. P. U. Unni: Though many call it ‘Vattakkali’ in the colloquial language, it is not merely a ‘circular dance’. As we go into the inner meaning of the word, it is actually a ritual dance performed around the holy lamp and is referred to as “DeepaPradakshina”. It may be called “vattakkali” for ease, perhaps due to ignorance. Since it is played in front of a temple it should be referred to as “DeepaPradakshina”. Vattakkali is played in many places including that of aboriginal, Muslim and Christian localities.

(Voice over) In places like Pallasanadesom, where there are four days of performance, each day’s kali has a special significance. The performance of the first day is known as “Ponnana

Kali” (also known as “Ponnaninja Kali”). Vattakkali songs of the first day are sung in praise of Vettakkaruman and Devi.

Sri. MadathilKunhikrishnan Nair: On the first day, while Ponnanakali, is performed the rhythm is “DhithaDhinhakka Thom Dhitha”, set in ‘chempada’ metre for ‘Nadavattam’ (the steps used to enter the stage). There are certain specific songs to be sung on the completion of Nadavattam.

(Voice over) The second day’s play is known as “andikkoothu”. ‘Andi’s are people from Tamilnadu and devotees of the deity Subramanya. As a means of penance to attain salvation, they roam around the country with a begging bowl. The Porattu of “Pandaram” is the main event on that day.

Sri. MadathilKunhikrishnan Nair: The Vaithari for Nadavattam of second day is DheemDhimiDhimi Thom Thom. The second day that of Andikkoothu is in praise of Lord Siva. This song is about Goddess Parvathi and Lord Parameswara. The songs sung on the whole day should be of Lord Siva. And in its second round, comes the song “NeendarChidayum...”

Sri. ShadanananAnikath: The next day’s play is called “Vallon”. Vallon is actually a farmer who spends his time wandering around the fields enjoying Nature by catching fish from the field. There is a custom of Vallon Kali in the month of Karkkidaka as a routine among the agriculturalists.

Sri. M.P. Karthikeyan: Play of the following day is known as “Malama”. Vattakkali songs of that day are sung in praise of the Goddess.

Sri. P.U.Unni: DeepaPradakshina in Siva Parvathi temple are performed to fulfill our wishes. Thus it has to be considered as an offering. Though it started in Trikkariyur Temple, it spread through “Sanghakkali” and is now performed in temples in Pallavur and other places, in the months of April and May.

Sri. KinattinkalRavindranathan Nair: Three rounds of Vattakkali played in the night are meant to keep people awake and the last round in the morning of the fourth day is meant to induce sleep.

Sri. ShadanananAnikath: The three characters Andi, Vallon and Malaya represent Lord Paramaswara. The worship of Lord Siva finally leads to the worship of Nature. Kanyarkali is a part of culture observed immediately after the beginning of the month of Medom, by worshipping nature for good harvest and sufficient rains. Observed immediately after Vishu the first day of the month of Medom, Kanyarkali is a part of culture that believes in worshipping nature for good harvest and sufficient rains.

(Voice over) On completion of all plays, the next morning, there is a ritual of singing hymns in praise of Yakshi and Gandharvas. It is believed that this is to invite of such imaginary powers on to the stage.

Dr. Jyothi: Ladies are not permitted to be in the vicinity where the hymns are recited. It is believed that the presence of Yakshi and Gandharvas is felt on the stage where the hymns are recited and that they will continue to remain there for seven days. So, the stage will be dismantled only after that.

(Voice over) 'Theyyattu' or 'Thudimuttu' is a custom performed after the four days' play to ward off the evil eye which might have affected the participants. This is done by touching all the joints of the body.

(Voice over) "Poovaral" is an important ritual performed towards the end of Kanyarkali. Singing auspicious songs, the participants offer rice, paddy and flower at the lamp placed at the centre of the stage.

Sri. MadathilKunhikrishnan Nair: Only one particular song is sung as a conclusion on the day of Poovaral. And this is in praise of Lord Krishna. As this is sung, there should not be any Vattakkali or other performances related to Kanyarkali because the song is intended to put the Lord to sleep.

Performance part of Kanyarkali

"Porattu"

Dr. C.R. Rajagopal: Kanyarkali has now become a theatrical art. Earlier there were equal importance given to both ritual and performance, but today the Kanyarkali stage has been turned into a theatre. Kanyarkali has gained international fame as a peculiar dance form, as the artists have acquired all the aspects of the performing art.

(Voice over) Porattu is an act of entertainment inherent in the structure of all the performing arts. Porattu is a feast of both visual and musical items, played to break the monotonous rituals. Porattu is a social art form performed presenting the village life humorously. Nevertheless, Porattu plays are on par with the ritualistic Vattakkali in its significance. Its functions are not only to impart humour and entertainment, but includes deep philosophical awareness, logical thinking as well as social education. Each porattu which lasts for hours comprises complex dance steps and martial acrobatics.

Dr. Jyothi: Traditionally, according to earlier Asans of Kanyarkali, from the beginning, there must be numerous rounds of Vattakkali which have to be sung without fail. It is said that the entertainment part of Porattu was included later, in order to do away with the monotonous rendering of Vattakkali. So now it is used like putting coconut scrapes in the preparation of “puttu”. Vattakkali is performed only at the beginning and at the end, and the whole of remaining time is left for the performances of Porattu. Today Porattu has virtually taken over the Vattakkali. Asans of ManjalurDesom are stubborn about singing 21 rounds of Vattakkali songs. They complete the whole number of rounds uncompromisingly. However, in other desoms, Vattakkali has been confined to the beginning and the end. In KuzhalmannamDesom also we can see singing and dancing Vattakkali in between ‘Porattu’s. It is understood that Kanyarkali has become a sort of performing art elsewhere.

Sri. ShadanananAnikath: There is no relation between Kanyarkali and Porattu. The Vattakkali verses rendering from 9 ‘o clock in the night till 8 am in the morning definitely leads to boredom. In order to get rid of the boredom, it appears that masters of the past created Porattu by adopting characters of Paanapporattu, Therukkoothu, Kakkarissi Drama, Harishchandra Drama, etc. I think they are called “Porattu,” precisely because they are played outside of the rituals.

(Voice over) The characters of the Kanyarkali Porattu represent various communities of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Generally, these Porattus presented in dance form, portray the

awareness, ignorance and peculiarities of these people. Among these, songs, steps, and the ending steps of each round are given importance. Besides, there are a few Porattus where importance is given to dialogues.

(Voice over) There are two types of Porattus based on the costumes and make-up. Porattus wearing glaring costumes like Pyjama, waist, and shining turban are called either “Dress Porattu” or “Rajapart”. They represent its link to Tamil culture. Dress porattus include Chakkiliyar, Thottiyar, Poosaris, Mariyamma, Vaishnavar, etc.

(Voice over) “Kariporattus” represent the Dalit communities engaged in different type of labours belonging to rural area as well as the hillside of Kerala. The costumes of Kariporattu are Black trouser, vest, a garland made of palm leaves, a short stick, and a golden bordered cloth worn in the shape of “X” across the chest. Kuravas, Kallulichithas, Vadukas, Nayadis, Cherumas, Malayas, Mudugas, Kavaras, Vettuvakkanakkas, Vedas, Kalladi, etc. are Karipporattu.

(Voice over) Female characters like Chakkilichi, Thottichi, Pookkari, Parachi, et al. wearing silk skirt, Jacket, Dhavani, with plaited hair decorated with flowers, appear in a charming form. All the female characters of Kanyarkali are performed only by male members.

(Voice over) Characters like Kuravan and Mannan enter the stage with a short stick in hand, wearing golden bordered dhoti, white shirt, a KasavuVeshti, and an ear stud.

(Voice over) Female characters of Karipporattu wear the golden bordered dhoti as well as the Veshti of the same material with their hair tied as a tuft, covered with flowers. These characters include Kurathi, Mannathi, Cherumi, Patti, et al.

(Voice over) Thallacherumi enters wearing “Muthappu” (covering the chest with dhoti), with a broom and a sift.

(Voice over) The costumes of Cheruma and Thottiya have a barbarous look.

(Voice over) Kanyarkali Porattus are divided into three based on the number of participants i.e., Ottapporattu, Irattapporattu and Koottapporattu. Ottapporattu is presented by a single

person, i.e., Chalkkaran, Ottachakkilian, Ottapparayan, Chitrasari, Sundarakkurukkal, Ottavedan, Kalladi, Thavittu Raman, Ottappoosari, Pattar, Ilichavayan, Ekamala, Nichakkoyma, Areelezhuthachan, Patti, and Thallacherumi.

(Voice over) There are Couple porattus in IrattaPorattu formed by both male and female characters i.e., Kuravan – Kurathi, Mannan – Mannathi, Cheruman – Cherumi, Thottiyam – Thottichi, Pookkari – Kallan, Rambhan – Rambhathi, Kavarachi – Kavara, Chakkilichi – Chakkiliyan et al.

(Voice over) There are dual male characters namely IrattaKoodan, Cheruchathan and Pambatti and dual female characters like Vellakodichi, Vesakodichi and Iratta Malachi.

(Voice over) Koottapporattu is meant for presenting dance form of complex nature. Porattus like Koottachakkiliar, Koottathottiyar, Koottamariyamma, Koottappoosari, Kongapparayar, Vaishnavar, Pandaras alias Tapaswi, Vettuvakkanakkar, Malayar, Koottamappila, Kallulichithanmar, Koottakkavaras, Koottakkuravar, Koottamudugar, Koottanayadis, Koottavedas, present a spectacular dance performance.

Dr. C.R.Rajagopal: The important aspect of this art form is its “playfulness” which appear in the unique performance of different desoms. There are art forms which give importance to SatwikaBhava(facial expressions). But here the importance is given to SanchariBhava(crossing feelings). It is a proof of life and growth of human culture. The uniqueness of Koottapporattus is its expression of forty or so bhavas, instead of permanent ones. This quality, the playfulness is its main attraction.

The content and structure of Porattu

(Voice over) Though the theme and style of presentation is simple, Kanyarkali Porattu also deals with deep and strong subjects. There is a custom of reciting “Virutham” at the intermediary stage, before the entry of RajapartPorattus to the main stage. Viruthams are verses explaining the origin, character and greatness of the Porattu. This practice is not found in Karipporattu, instead, they introduce themselves through the songs.

(Voice over) Subsequently they enter the stage reciting rhythmic sounds.

(Voice over) The interrogator, usually the Kaliyasan, enquires about their identity as and when each porattu enters the stage. These people explain their identity to the Kaliyasan, since he could not recognize them from their costumes and the items in their possession.

“Can’t you recognize us from our song and dance?”

“I Can’t”

“Can’t you recognize us from anything?”

“I Can’t”

“we are Mariyammass”

“Oh, now I understand that you are Mariyammass. From where are you coming?”

“We are coming after going around many places.”

(Voice over) Each community explains about the greatness of their caste and occupation.

(Voice over) Besides they also explain their sufferings and the problems faced by them in their life.

(Voice over) Then they present their individual abilities.

(Voice over) The songs also include the description of the places visited.

(Voice over) “Aattivattam” is a stage of Koottapporattu, where the charm of the group dance appears. It is a complex performance where artists form groups and pairs. This is the main attraction of Dress Porattu.

Sri. M.P. Karthikeyan: Aattivattam is seen in different forms, i.e., thannatti, munnatti, ettaatti, kallukudiyanaatti, kadannupokku, etc. When the artists play Koottapporattu in the stage in full swing, it gives a spectacular visual treat beyond description.

(Voice over) The Porattu retreats by offering prayers, after many rounds, explaining their purpose of visit, and presenting the abilities of each character.

(Voice over) “Vaanakku” is a humorous conversation of the interrogator with the Porattu characters. The function of ‘Vanakkukaran’ of Kanyarkali is similar to the Vidooshaka in Sanskrit drama. The oral function of vaanakkukaran is both thought provoking and humorous. His function includes complete familiarization of each character of the Porattu.

Through improvisation and by linking the contemporary events with Kanyarkali, Vanakkukaran keeps the performance alive.

(Voice over) The theme of all the couple porattus in Kanyarkali is the same. In the beginning the female character enters the stage. In the course of enjoying festivals like Thrissur Pooram, Mulayankavu vela, ArattupuzhaPooram, PuthusseryVedi, KunisseryKummatty, etc. they miss their husbands in the crowd. Finally, they reach here after searching them in many places. Meanwhile their husbands also reach the stage in search of their dear ones. They meet each other with the help of Kaliyasan. They start quarrelling because of the long absence. Kaliyasan intervenes and smoothens the situation by uniting them again. This theme is somewhat similar to the one in Porattunatakam.

(Voice over) Characters entering the stage explain their individual occupation. While Kuravan sells the cloth, Kurathi engages in Palmistry. Kurathi predicts Asan's life by studying his palm. Kurathi moves away from the stage on instruction from the Kaliyasan. Afterwards Kuravan enters and describes the festivals seen by him. They start quarrelling when they face each other. "Eashal" is the term used for the quarrel between the couple. After settling their quarrel, they perform "Onakkali" and they go back.

(Voice over) The same is the scene with Mannan and Mannathi. Mannathi moves away from the scene after explaining about the sufferings of dhobi, and also the reason why she missed her husband.

(Voice over) The characters, Cheruman and Cherumi are peculiar to Palakkad district. Cherumis engage in the activities of watering the fields along with men. Their conversations reach on the verge of obscene language.

(Voice over) The characters who have the background of Tamil culture, like Dasi of Tanjavur, Pookkari of Tiruchenthur, Thottichi of Anamalai, Chakkilichis from the outskirts of Palani, and Thekkathi of Tirunelveli reach Palakkad in search of any job. They meet their husbands at the stage.

(Voice over) The occupation of Thottichi is Tattooing. She knows all types of tattoos. In the Porattu "Pookkari&Kallan", the character Pookkari enters first by selling flowers. The

character of theif says, that for him, Alathursubjail is like father's house, Palakkad jail is like grandma's house, Madras jail is like uncle's house and Pollachi jail is like his kids' house. Pookkari demands a house to stay, a mat to lie down, oil to apply on the head, water to drink, a pond to take bath and dress to wear as her conditions to marry him.

Sri. ShadanananAnikath: There is a custom of taking oath towards the end. In that oath, the character of Kurathi sings thus;

“Oh Nanu, there is no one in this world so perfect
I take oath on that fact by the lamp lit here”

That means, nobody is cent percent perfect. That is why incidents like this take place. Eventhough she has got pregnant from extra relation, the Kuravan says, let us forget all and accept that child as ours. We can rear him along with our children. This consolation is an indicator of a great culture prevalent earlier.

The couple porattus of this kind, which have as its common theme, silly quarrels, temporary separation and reunion by the intervention of Kaliyasan, functions primarily as a family court in a society.

Each porattu is different and distinct in both content and presentation. There are hundreds of such porattus playing throughout desoms, which deal with issues ranging from socio-political to philosophical intricacies.

Sundarakkurukkal is an ottapporattu played only at Pallassanadesom which is peculiar for its musical quality.

Sri. MadathilKunhikrishnan Nair: it is set perfectly in classical music. The song I am going to sing now is in the Raga Sankarabharanam. Thus came Sundarakkurukkal. It is already mentioned that he comes all the way from southern Madhurapuri. Vanakku is rendered to let the audience know who has come.

“Can't you recognize me from my appearance?”

“I can't”.

“The veshti worn on the head will tell who I am”

“I can't even with that”

“Can't you recognize with the holy mark on my forehead?”

“I can’t”

Asan enquires about his native place and occupation. He says, he has come from Southern Madhurapuri, and hearing that there is a special performance going on here. When the Asan asks about his occupation, he answers indirectly as “my father is a Priest who does ‘pooja’ to Lord Vinayaka. I do ‘pooja’ to Vigneswara. Vinayaka, Vigneswara, Ganapathi all are one and the same. Then Asan asks whether he could conduct a pooja in the Ganapathi temple here. Then he agrees.

The porattus of Kanyarkali present in-depth philosophical thoughts besides its musical quality. Ottapporattus are known for its emphasis on Vedantic essence, logical thought, as well as literary values. They explain the meaninglessness of casteism, the ultimate essence of life and the origin of life itself in the theatre.

Sri. MadathilKunhikrishnan Nair: (In the KongapparayarPorattu), they say that, you leave the dead body of a person who lived upto ninety or so years in your home, at the burial ground and we are the people who look after, till it gets buried. So aren’t we greater than you? The deity Valli, who got married to your Lord Subrahmanya belongs to our community. We are the people who have beaten drums for the marriage of Goddess Daivana, the second wife of Lord Subrahmanya. Isn’t our caste higher than yours?

In the songs of certain Porattu, there are detailed descriptions of the growth of an embryo into a child.

In the sixth month of pregnancy, the child will be in the form of a tortoise, in the seventh month it sits inside the womb, in the eighth month it starts walking inside, in the ninth month, it gets a uniform shape, and in the final month, it drops down into this world with a scream.

Sri. ShadanananAnikath: There is a song in the ChakkiliyaPorattu. Four legs are four Vedas, eyes are Sun and the Moon, its tail is Lord Vayu, its horns are the world of Brahma, ears are the world of Vishnu, cow dung is Lord Siva, the whole of the cow’s body is Devaloka, etc. Thus I eat only the knowledge cow and not a dead cow.

Sri. KinattinkalRavindranathan Nair: When it is said that you people are prohibited here because you eat meat of dead cow, their answer is, haven’t you heard that in the Vedic Sacrifice ritual, cow is being slaughtered by reciting mantras and its meat is being prepared

as curry for the feast afterwards. The interesting thing is that, the cow slaughter is not even meant for consumption.

Sri. M.P. Karthikeyan: “Utalkkooru” is the most important Vanakku in Kanyarkali. Though it is rendered in Tamil, it is about the biological growth of a human being, from the first movement in the womb of a woman, till the birth, the whole process is described beautifully in this Vaanakku.

Sri. MadathilKunhikrishnan Nair: When the allegation is raised that of Thottiyas are untouchables, and they are prohibited to enter the temple premises, they answer by reciting their description of occupation.

(
song) *we get up in the midnight and go to the burial ground....*

The songs in the Porattu of Vaishnavar portray the essence of the philosophy of Adyathma Vedanta.

Dr. Jyothi: In the Vanaakku of Ottapparaya... A house is being built with the five elements i.e., earth, water, fire, air and ether. In that house, without thinking of the almighty Lord Siva, those who commit severe sins like matricide, patricide, infanticide, killing of Brahmins, cow slaughter, killing of Gurus, denying the existence of God, capturing possession of other people, interested in annoying our own masters, liars, those who disobey the ritualistic functions of their castes, trading of meat, etc., are to be called “Chandalas” by their action. The untouchability or distance of pollution is applicable to those Chandalas by action, not for us who are called Parayas by birth.

Sri. Vasudev: In the Porattu of Koottachakkiliya, when they were asked of their native place, they answer thus; those places which can be seen by our eyes, which can be heard with our ears, which can be walked with our legs, and so the so called fourteen worlds are ours only, my lord. There is a philosophical vision in that saying. It simply makes all our concepts of boundaries irrelevant.

Martial tradition in Kanyarkali

We can see many indications of Kerala's unique martial tradition in Kanyarkali. This is basically a ritualistic martial art. The very appearance and steps of Vattakkali itself resemble those of Nair soldiers.

The function of Avittathallu which is conducted in connection with Onam festival is an expression of invoking historical memoirs of the spirit of militant attack.

The practice of Kalari was inevitable during early days.

Most of the Kariporattus enter into the stage with a short stick (with 3 'Chaan' length) or a long stick (with 12 chaan of length) in their hand. The interim closing steps (idakkalasangam) are made in the scientific form of Kalari practice.

NallattilBalakrishnan Nair: A long stick with a length of 12 "Chaans". Thus they perform their martial arts by forming pairs. Likewise, the short stick of length 3 "Chaans" are played in double porattus like "Kootan".

Besides we can see the influence of martial arts like Kalarippayattu, Kolkkali, Parichamuttu, etc. which have its origin in North Malabar in the porattuof Kanyarkali.

Kanyarkali and other art forms.

There have been many exchanges between traditional ritualistic folk art forms of Kerala and Kanyarkali which can claim 500 years of antiquity. We can find direct or indirect relation between Kanyarkali and Classical art forms like Koothu, Koodiyattam, Krishnanattam, Kathakali, Thullal, etc., and folk arts like Padayani, PottanTheyyam, Sanghakkali, Porattunatakam, Mudi yettu, KakkarissiNatakam, AryamalaNatakam, Ezhamathu Kali, etc.

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Dr. Jyothi: Kathakali, being our prime temple art keeps many resemblances with Kanyarkali. Hand gestures of both Kathakali and Vattakkali are similar. The way hand is being held, the style of steppingas "VellamalarthiChavuttuka" (the peculiar style of placing foot), and "Vaarikkoottithozhuka" (the special way of folding palm in worship) are similar to Kathakali.

The “Sandhyakeli” a percussion orchestra played as an announcement of the day’s Kanyarkali performance during the twilight hours is the same as of Kathakali. The costume of Yavana (character pertaining to Greece) in Kathakali is exactly the same as Ottamappila or Koottamappila of Kanyarkali.

The freedom to add popular elements in Thullal might have been adopted from Kanyarkali. It is believed that the origin of Krishnanattam was at the places of Kuzhalmannam and Manjalur of Palakkad which were once under the Zamorin’s jurisdiction. The costumes of Krishnanattam are seen in the Vattakkali of Kuzhalmannam. There is a close resemblance of the steps of Krishnanattam in Kanyarkali. Besides these, there are similarities between folk art forms and Kanyarkali. Kanyarkali may have adopted couple porattus more from the unique art form of Palakkad, i.e., Porattunatakam which is performed in cucumber fields and post harvest paddy fields. The porattu Kuravan – Kurathi have relations with both Porattunatakam and Kakkarissi Natakam. It seems that Kanyarkali is more refined in the use of its oration than those folk arts. It may be because of its elite audience. There is a ritual performance of central Kerala namely Mudi yettu, where there is a character called Koyimpada Nair. Ittikandappan, the Nair representative who appears in Kanyarkali has the same role. The story of the Porattu of Pambatty in Kanyarkali adapts its story from Aryamalanatakam which is performed by the Pana community of Palakkad District.

We can find similar lines in the Vallon songs of Kanyarkali, as the hymns of Pottantheyyam performed in the temples of North Kerala. It is seen in Padayani as well.

These very lines are seen in the Pulavritam songs of PottanTheyyam also. Likewise, the lines in which human body is conceived as a house are seen both in the hymns of PottanTheyyam and Kanyarkali Vallon Songs. The meaninglessness of caste system is questioned by Koottapparaya and Koottachakkiliya Porattus. Same is the case with PottanTheyyam.

There is a coconut oil seller in Padayani called Anthony Mappila. A similar Coconut oil seller appears in Kanyarkali also.

These lines are seen both in Pulavritam songs and Vallon songs.

Sri. Vasudev: In PottanTheyyam, there is a saying, “we are born in the heap of rubbish and you are born to offer pooja to the Lord”. Likewise, in KootanPorattu, “our landlord is walking on the high ridge and we are destined to walk in the lowest ridge in the paddy fields”. We can clearly understand the exchange between different art forms in these instances.

Organizations

It has been 21 years since an organization named Kerala Kanyarkali Arts Promotion Council was formed. Some of us had an apprehension that, Kanyarkali is facing frailty due to its antiquity. This organization was formed as an aftermath of that feeling. In the year 1993, the Kanyarkali lovers of NemmaraDesom, conducted a competition, involving all the Desoms belonging to Chittur and Alathur Taluks. When that event turned successful, there emerged an idea to form an organization to promote this ancient art form. This organization was established on February 13th of 1994 at Nemmara. Now this organization has full support and participation from all the artists and Kanyarkali lovers of all Desoms.

In early days, each porattu used to take upto two and a half hours of time, and now it has been shortened to 45 minutes due to the instruction for participation in KKAPC annual meets, and this in turn has led to the habit of encapsulating elaborate events in conventional performances as well. Now this trend has spread to ritual contexts also.

Sri. M.P. Karthikeyan: The prime objective of Kerala Kanyarkali Arts Promotion Council is to reinstate its original grandeur which has been lost through the ages. The council has to work hard to reinvent the ancient grace of this great art. It is a fact that the Council has achieved some of its goals. The first achievement is that the council could attract more youth and new generations into Kanyarkali with the realization that it is an indispensable part of our day to day life. The main achievement the youth gains through this art is the confidence to face situations.

Instead of individuals, the council accepts membership from Desoms only. KKAPC is able enough to make the desoms restart the practice of yearly conduct of Kanyarkali and it is engaged in such activities as well. There are many talented artists, who excels in singing

songs and playing unique porattus from different desoms. The council makes such talents to be known and recognized outside their desoms. It also encourages those talented artists by giving awards and recognitions.

Now all desoms voluntarily observe the stipulated conditions once introduced by the council. As we realized that we can keep the dignity and standard of the prestigious art even otherwise, we gave up the idea of competition. Now the KKAPC annual meet is only exhibiting porattus of different desoms, nonetheless they keep up the reputation and uniqueness of respective desoms.

At present communities other than Nair caste also perform Kanyarkali. There are different styles of performance in different desoms. When it is presented according to the practices of a community and desom it would have more perfection. Moreover, it was almost impractical to accommodate all the communities who perform Kanyarkali at the time when the organization was formed. However we have no discrimination about the Kanyarkali performed by other communities and we believe whole heartedly that who ever performs Kanyarkali does a divine thing. But it is a fact that the organization is still not strong enough to incorporate all the communities and that is why it is confined to Nair communities.

Kanyarkali, which had only male artists both on the stage and in the background, has gone through a slight reformation in recent times. Organizations like Pallassana Social Welfare Society have succeeded in bringing girls into Kanyarkali training and staging. A group of girls under the leadership of Anjali Rabishankar of KakkayurDesom have proven the feminine sweetness of Kanyarkali songs during recent years. It is a rare blissful experience to hear those musical as well as philosophical songs of KongapparayarPorattu sung by these girls.

Sri. Vasudev: It is seen as a new trend in Kanyarkali that there is a gathering at Dubai for conducting Kanyarkali Biennale at the conventional Nine pillared stagewith the help of various desoms. Most of the artists are those settled over there, along with some Asans brought to guide them from Palakkad. Another interesting fact is that they train young generation who have no contact with their native land and encourage them to perform different porattus. This initiative is worth appreciation for preserving the art form for those who left their native land in search of subsistence, with full perfection and grandeur.

Sri. MadathilBhaskaran Nair: Now we have formed an organization called Pallassana Social Welfare Society which engages in bringing to perform at different venues both male and female members belonging to all communities, a ritual hitherto performed solely by men belonging to a particular community. We are getting full support from both central and state governments. We have been instrumental in getting 160 scholarships in learning Kanyarkali for girls and people belonging to non-Nair communities. We have gathered a scheme of rupees 1500 per month for four students from the ministry of culture and another scheme called “guru-sishya” from Tanjore Cultural Centre where the teacher gets Rs. 7500 and student Rs. 5000. There are three batches of 25 students each, getting scholarship of Rs. 1500 and a master trainer getting Rs. 10000. This is done not due to the effort of a single person or a community but because of a combined group activity. We have a great intention to spread this art form across community boundaries and reach out globally.

Steps

Kanyarkali being primarily a dance form anchors itself on the steps. There is no much importance given to hand gestures and facial expressions, instead it uses rich and complex steps through out the performance. There are distinct steps used at times like the entry of the Porattu into the stage, during the interim closure of each round, etc. The basic stage of practicing Kanyarkali is learning these steps itself.

It is in the footing structure of the performance starting in a very slow rhythm and progressing through crescendo upto its peak, the charm of group dance appears.

Sri. ShadanananAnikath: This has many stepping patterns. There are altogether ten patterns. First leg, second leg, third leg, double step towards back, double step towards front, “soochi”, etc. “Soochi means, when a song is begun, the artists have to stand on the toe till the end of the rendering. It can only be withdrawn till the beginning of prolonged rendering of next line. This is done just like in the step used in Kathakali.

There are different “Kalaasams” for each song. Kalaasams are by foot beat, by jumping, by about turn, etc. When it is done with rapid rhythm, the male characters do it by jumping high where as the female characters do this with minor motions without raising their legs so high.

Sri. NallattilBalakrishnan Nair: The artists start their first appearance into the performance only after thoroughly learn foot steps, by practicing these rhythms: “they kidathithi they kidathomthom, dithadhinhakkathom”

Sri. Thottankara Ramachandran Master: These primary steps with “Dhithadhinhakkathomdhitha” are to be learned thoroughly by stepping right leg forward once and left leg sidewise twice. All other stepping patterns are multiplications of these primary steps. There are altogether 64 steps in Kanyarkali. They can be used by improvisation. Many steps can be improvised in single porattus. But in the case of Koottapporattu, there must be an understanding between the performers to change from one step to another, when someone fails in the pattern, it will affect the whole event. In order to attain full perfection the artists should undergo thorough practice.

Agricultural life in Kanyarkali

It is said that Kanyarkali is the beginning of the agricultural life of a certain culture. We can get numerous indications of agricultural lore from Kanyarkali.

Sri. ShadanananAnikath: The very custom of “Kali kumbidal” is the act of sowing the seed. It is done in the next morning of the festival of Vishu. The end ritual of “Poovaryl” is nothing but harvesting. This is the mythology behind these rituals.

In the day of “Vallon”, vattakkali songs are related to agriculture. Vallon is an agriculturist.

The first porattu of first day, i.e., “chalkkaran” itself is a demonstration of starting of agricultural activities. Within a single Porattu, the acts of ploughing, sowing seed, and up to harvest is demonstrated.

Dr. A.K.Nambiar: Looking from the angle of theatre, the porattu of “Chalkkaran” utilizes the whole space provided in the Kanyarkali stage. He uses the whole of the theatrical space provided for ploughing, sowing the seed, uses fertilizer, etc. These acts symbolize the salient feature of an agricultural society.

In the Porattu of “Cherumi”, there is a scene where the character of Cherumi collects and sifts the granules of paddy scattered in the field after harvest.

The Porattu of Koottacherumakkal proves that fertility and agriculture are central themes of Kanyarkali.

There is a ritual of bringing spike of Paddy into the Kanyarkali stage by the characters of Koottacherumakkal in Pallissanadesom. They place the ritualistic umbrella made of palmleaves, spike of paddy, and other paraphernalia in one of the pillars of the stage by great uproar and clamor. The porattu which is performed at the time of dawn can have the power of inviting the whole past of agricultural life.

Dr. A. K. Nambiar: When I roam around different places of Kerala to perform this art form, I had a feeling that people are reluctant to have Vattakkali to be staged. According to them there is nothing interesting in Vattakkali and all they need is only Porattu. Then I asked whether the basic element of Kanyarkali is Vattakkali and they answered not. Then how can we call this performance a Kanyarkali devoid of Vattakkali?

It is an indication of the high influence of 'theatricalism' into rituals. People are no longer interested in witnessing rituals. Rather the interest is on visual performances. We can have both visual and audio pleasure from these Porattus. They try to articulate matters that are deeply related to contemporary social life. There is diversity of songs, interesting dance steps, orations, etc. in these Porattus. Social life is depicted mainly in Porattus. There is an immense possibility of verbal communication in these performances and the audience is well trained to receive its message.

Though they usually speak in a language which is typical to Palakkad, a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam, it is well received in other parts of Kerala.

Dr. Jyothi: We can observe apparent differences in the public performances which is away from its native locality. We can find the difference in language, the cutting short of songs and Vaanakku, etc. in external performances. They use very less Tamil in non-natural contexts.

Porattu characters are used as a strong media to reflect the feelings of those who are kept away from the freedom of worshipping and socially downtrodden. The porattus enter the stage worn with the dressing style of various communities and questions the social injustice and wrongdoings. According to them caste system is a nonsense.

Kanyarkali Porattus give importance to admonition and social awareness. We can see in many porattus the theme of social inequality, caste discrimination, out burst of suppressed feelings, etc. Kanyarkali satisfies the elite class with its ritual side, and encourages the downtrodden to question the upper class. Thereby it can satisfy both the extremes through its rituals and porattu. It covers areas ranging from Tamil nadu to different districts of Kerala and depicts their culture and problematize many social problems. There is a court scene in the ChakkiliyaPorattu of Pallassana. The main character of the scene is a Namboodiri. His extra

marital relation is brought into the trial. Now a day we are familiar with cases of atrocities against women. The Namboodiri has an incest relation. Finally, that person had to give compensation. This is staged as a drama within the drama.

Sri. Vasudev: Kanyarkali like most of our arts have nourished itself from our agricultural life. Kanyarkali too faces a major crisis, as our agricultural life undergoes drastic change. There was an inseparable connection between the life outside and inside of the Kanyarkali stage. Today things change rapidly. So there is an obvious change in this performance. It is more visible in folk arts than classical arts. In that sense it is a real problem.

We have such a situation that many porattus vanish due to the change in social structure. Many porattus which are performed in early days, seen gradually withdrawing from the scene. There was a Porattu called Kalladi in desoms like Pallassana in early days which is played nowhere now. Some porattus find itself unfit for the changed social situation. An example is the porattu of Uncle and Nephew which was developed in matriarchal family system. Today it has no relevance at all. It can be communicated easily with everyone. We can have social criticism in current scenario. For that we need new Porattus or new interpretations of Porattus.

Once there was a habit of oral formulaic creation of songs. That was an act of creating new songs describing an important event happened during that year. For example, there was an incident in Pallassana where an oracle is being crushed by an elephant. That became a song of that year. Landlord of Chittur had bought an elephant that year which was a sensational news, and that became another song.

Sri Dwaraka Krishnan: This song was in currency in early days. I used to hear it from my Asan. Later on it vanished.

Sri. Vasudev: Some porattus could survive its times. That means, it can be interpreted in a different way in different era. In the porattu of Malayas, the people from the hills come down to offer certain valuable things to the Goddess. There is an agent or manager called “Alvari”, recruited by the landlord to look after the needs of the tribes. He exploits the tribes and they are forced to rob devotees who are heading for Palani. Even though the scene is portrayed so comically, it raises a strong message of the seriousness of the situation. Today it is more

relevant to read this porattu as the exploitation of tribal people by the middlemen. When we discuss the issue of Adivasis currently, this porattu is getting rich dimension.

Dr. C.R. Rajagopal: The social functioning of different caste systems in a society is very important. The native lore of a village are actually secular gatherings but having peculiarities of caste identity. Such a unique village culture can only sustain the culture of agriculture and human love. That is the relevance of different folk communities of Palakkad, for the prosperity of their village, conduct Kanyarkali in the native stage.

Dr. Jyothi: There is no art form existing here merely for ornamental value. When a folk art loses its social function it is sure that it will vanish soon from the scene.

Sri. Vasudev: The porattus of Kanyarkali end with a porattu called “Malachi”. Malachi is the last porattu, playing mostly after the sunrise which will be the finale of all performances. It may be because it is the finishing act, the energy it gives is something different. The theme of the porattu is like this: Malachi belonging to the southern hills, asks her lover who belong to northern hills, to go with her to witness festivals of the land. She complains of not having a hair ornament to wear, ear rings for the ear, etc. and without which she cannot imagine going for a festival. Then the Malayan answers, if you don’t have hair ornament or ear-ring, I shall provide you and we shall go to the various festivals of the land. Palakkad gap lies in between these two hills. All the festivals are being conducted in these stretch of land. Such a rendering gives a fantastic feeling. The whole of Kanyarkali festivities finish with the indication of the history and geography of Palakkad. That ending performances give a rejuvenation to the viewers and participants. There is an anxiety of separation, sort of bereavement, an anguish of the ending of a great phantasmagoria that has been witnessing all these four nights.

The plays which transcend us to an unknown world by songs and dances of great energy happening all these four nights approach its finishing point.

The dawn has come.

The porattus of Kodichi and Malachi have withdrawn from the stage reluctantly without fulfilling their craze of singing and dancing.

Legs have weakened after repeated steps.

Tongue have weakened after long singing.

She bids farewell praying for strength to the dancing legs and singing tongues.

It is a heart breaking farewell of Kanyarkali.

The social spirit which tied all the people together these days by forgetting all the worries and problems of family and occupation, is meeting its end. They are all returning to once on duties.

Paddy fields which awaits sowing of seeds, minds that expect prosperity and fertility remains. The Kanyarkali stage stops silently.

Everybody parting by the hope of meeting next time next year for the Kanyarkali again.

The play continues....

Credits

THE END