SUSTAINING TRADITIONAL TRAINING IN KUTIYATTAM

~~~~~~~~~ G. Venu ~~~~~~~~~

G. Venu is a performer, teacher and scholar of Kutiyattam and a senior disciple of Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar. He is also the founder of Natanakairali (Research and Performing Centre for Traditional Arts) and Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smarakulu (Training Centre for Kutiyattam). His major contributions are his adaptations of Mahakavi Kalidasa’s plays Abhijana Sakuntalam and Vikramorvasheeyam for Kutiyattam.

In our Kutiyattam gurukula tradition there is a saying: “One master: two students in the beginning period of training; one master: one student in the final stage.” It reveals that proper training in Kutiyattam is only possible when the master concentrates on one individual’s performance at a time. Hence, the most distinguishing aspect in the training of students for art forms like Kutiyattam is the very personal attention of the master, which is essential to them for their growth as artists. In the acting style of Kutiyattam, very subtle and minute movements of the eyes and concentration of the mind must be observed and scrutinized by the guru, whereupon s/he gives guidelines to the disciple for further development.

The complex and vast spectrum of the performing arts of India, handed down from generation to generation from teacher to student, is preserved mainly through the gurukula system of education within the family or community. From her/his early years, the student can glean a great deal of insight from observing the guru’s stage performance, as well as everyday demeanour. Then systematic training is imparted by the guru to the student. After a certain stage, the student also performs with fellow actors. All of this happens over a period of at least a decade, with the student and guru in very close relationship.

The system of the preservation of what UNESCO has termed “the oral and intangible heritage of humanity,” through family tradition has almost come to an end. With that, the gurukula system has nearly vanished. In the second half of the twentieth century, public and private institutions have taken over the task of giving training in various arts such as Kutiyattam. An unfortunate outcome of this trend is that several vital aspects of training intrinsic to the gurukula tradition have disappeared, one example being the considerable shortening of the training period itself. Consequently, many traditional art forms are suffering from the decline in skill and potency of their artists and in the meanwhile, patronage and public interest in these art forms continue to diminish. As the basic spiritual values and aesthetic language of the forms become fractured, there is little scope for creative advancement which is necessary to sustain these traditions. Some of them have become obsolete, while others are on the verge of extinction within the time span of a generation. We need to think realistically of a practical but decisively radical way to arrest this loss of quality and traditions.

With our present experience, we now totally believe that a training system similar to the ancient gurukula system, while still meeting the requirements of the present societal and economic climate, is possible; only through such intimate relationship between teacher and disciple, such knowledge can be transmitted.

Guru Ammanur Madhava Chakyar in 1984

We were convinced that the loss of Kutiyattam, being the oldest surviving Sanskrit theatre tradition in India, would be an incurable loss for our Malayali culture as well as for the humanity as a whole. In 1979 Natanakairali began working with the Ammannur tradition of Kutiyattam artists whose family troupe was about to die out without a new generation of aspiring artists to continue their legacy.

Traditionally, only members of the Chakyar caste could become actors in Kutiyattam and Chakyar Koothu, while Nangiar women of the Nambiar caste could perform female roles in Kutiyattam and in the female solo theatre, Nangiar Koothu (which itself was nearly extinct two decades ago) and only men of the Nambiar caste could play the mizhavu (drum) in these performances. There

Kutiyattam - G. Venu as Surpanaka
were about eighteen families, with different clan names like Ammannur, Kuttancheri, and Koipa, who were the custodians of Kutiyattam in Kerala. Each of the families was allotted a certain number of temples, the responsibility of the Chakyars of that family was to conduct Kutiyattam performances in those temples. As remuneration for this service, the Chakyar families were given paddy fields by the temple, the income from which was quite sufficient to keep them in reasonable comfort. However, the system came to an abrupt end in 1970 as agricultural land was redistributed, stripping such families as the Chakyars of land, and thus, drastically affecting their lives and arts. Unable to live from the meagre income from their arts, young members of the family had to give up their traditional profession and seek other means of livelihood.

When Natanakairali began researching various performing arts and their future, what came as a shocking truth was that many renowned artists had no opportunities to teach, because they had no affiliation with institutions and organizations. Thus, most of them could not get regular work, while others desired to work as freelancers. Whatever the case might have been, many outstanding masters were idling away their inheritance as they had no chance to shape a younger generation. With these predicaments in mind, we started training programmes for some of the rare art forms under the auspices of Natanakairali. It was against this backdrop that a Kutiyattam training programme was launched at the Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam, based in Ammannur Chakyar Madhom at Irinjalakuda.

Ammannur Madhava Chakyar was performing Koothu as part of adiyantiram (annual routine performances) (in temples and spent all his time in Irinjalakuda. At the age of fifty-eight, he had neither disciples, nor a Kalari (training centre) to teach in. He was very healthy, practicing more than one-hundred Surya Namaskarams (Yogic Prostrations to the Sun God) every morning. It was obvious that if he trained no one, it would be an irremediable loss for Kutiyattam. However, the Chakyar living in orthodoxy was not inclined to bring Kutiyattam outside of the temple, or to teach those who were not of the same community. Thus, it took some years of persuasion to make him come around, and I became his first pupil from outside the traditional family at the age of thirty-four. During this period, the art-enthusiast, D. Appukuttan Nair also arranged stages for Ammannur’s performance at Margi in Thrivananthapuram and started a Kutiyattam section there.

We were keen to develop a gurukula training system along the lines of Ammannur Chachu Chakyar’s training system, but adapted to today’s modern environment. Chachu Chakyar established his Kalari in the beginning of the twentieth century when the Ammannur tradition itself was coming to a standstill. It was clear that the Chakyar’s Kalari was able to impart a high-level performance training utilizing all possibilities of teaching and ways of knowing, because of his three principle disciples. The first was Painkulam Rama Chakyar who went on to establish the Kutiyattam department at Kerala Kala Mandalam, and was a pathfinder in introducing Kutiyattam to modern audiences. The second was Ammannur Parameswaran Chakyar who was responsible for preserving certain rare ritualistic performances in the temple. And the third was Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, one of the greatest performers of the twentieth century, who taught both at Margi, Thrivananthapuram, and at Irinjalakuda. It is a known fact that the present legacy of Kutiyattam was developed by none other than these three disciples.

We were thinking of rejuvenating Kutiyattam at the Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam, with Ammannur Madhava Chakyar as the chief master, after a gap of about three decades. Details were collected from the aforementioned three Chakyars about the gurukula system in order to prepare the lesson plan for training. We conducted several discussions on the how to adapt the gurukula system to meet the requirements of the modern and changing atmosphere. We decided that the training period should be under fifteen years, and that entering students should be no older than thirteen. We resolved that each batch would consist of no more than seven students and that each batch would have a full training period before a new batch could begin training.

We accepted children of any community who displayed a flair for performance.
and a readiness to learn and be committed to their study. We agreed that disciples should be able to carry out a standard school education so they could be engaged in the wider society and receive all the necessary certifications. We decided that the best times of day to conduct training were the early morning and evening; these times should be utilized to the maximum. Furthermore, apart from Kutiyattam training, we wanted the students to undergo training in other disciplines whenever possible and at suitable times of the year, including Kerala's martial art of Kalaripayattu, yoga and meditation, and Sanskrit classes; in addition they also would receive an extensive oil massage once a year. The Guru himself or herself should be supervising the training program as a whole and the training of each individual student, along with the other staff.

The challenge of artists trained in the gurukula system today is that they have no recognized certificate or degree which gives them access to job opportunities in formal, educational institutions. It is, therefore, imperative that universities which conduct examinations and impart degrees recognize the informal cultural centres of learning that the gurukulams are. They should allow students trained in gurukulams to appear for exams so they can prove their ability, and get the needed qualifications. We also keep the number of students trained in each batch so low because we only want to release so many artists into the world that there will be adequate employment for them. Making Kutiyattam a viable career is a significant challenge—one that we have been working to address all along.

The Sangeet Natak Akademi gave a total grant of Rs.2395750/- for the period 1991 to 2004 for the Kutiyattam training programme at the Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam. That is to say, on average Rs.184288/- for one year, Rs.15357/- for one month—this is only equal to what a government teacher earns in a month. This was the financial assistance that we received for thirteen years, which included the teachers' salaries, the students' stipends, and a twelve-day Kutiyattam Festival each year at Natanakairali. All these figures are cited here to draw attention to the simple fact that even a small financial assistance can go a long way to yield rich results for such gurukula training programmes.

Very recently, Kutiyattam was recognized by the UNESCO as “A Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity”. Another key aspect of the gurukula system is the degree to which sacred, intangible knowledge can be preserved, passed on, and honoured from generation to generation. Secrets kept by the masters from a lifetime of experience and association with other performers, are revealed only to the most sincere and devout of students, and only when s/he reaches a mature level of strength and porousness to receive it. Today Ammannur Madhana Chakyar is 88, has bid farewell to the stage, and can no longer remember the vast score of Kutiyattam knowledge he has imparted to his disciples over the past twenty five years, nor can he recognize his own disciples. It was only because the Ammannur Gurukulam, Natanakairali, and Margi had overcome all hurdles and conserved their Kalaris that Ammannur's art and wisdom are now in the hands of a younger generation. We now proudly have a number of young artists who can perform almost the entire repertoire of Kutiyattam, who have a sound base of knowledge about the tradition and its values, and are the cream of Kutiyattam. This new generation of artists who are making a place for themselves in Kerala and the world over include Usha Nangiar, Kapila Nangiar, Sooraj Nambiar, Ammannur Rajaneesh, Ranjit Ramachandran Chakyar, Saritha Krishnakumar, Apanna Nangiar from the Ammannur Gurukulam, Natanakairali, and Margi Madhu Narayan and Raman from Margi.

Thus, the most fruitful and sustainable means to conserve and nourish traditional art forms is to give all kinds of encouragement to institutions that work in the gurukula tradition and to those who aspire to learn directly under eminent artists. This is the only way to truly save and nourish our art forms.

Transmission and Transformation:

YAKSHAGANA OF COASTAL KARNATAKA

Katrin Binder

Katrin Binder studied Indology at the University of Tuebingen, Germany. Her M.A. thesis on Yakshagana was published recently (Fisher, Katrin, 2004). Since 2001 she trains at the Yakshagana Kendra, Udupi, and performs regularly.

Yakshagana is a popular dance-drama prevalent in the coastal belt of Karnataka. The word ‘yakshagana’ appears first to have been used to refer to manuscripts of prasangas (‘episodes’) written in the ‘yakshagana style’, which seems to designate a literary genre rather than a performing tradition. We do not know when these episodes from the epics and Puranas became the basis for theatrical performances of the kind seen today. It also seems possible that Yakshagana once was a musical system.

The term Yakshagana now refers to all-night performances characterized by colourful costumes and make-up,