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”. A new 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 Madhava 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 Ammanur’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, Aparna 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,
imposing head-dresses, vigorous dancing, a distinct style of music and witty dialogues. Today there are about thirty troupes of professional all-male performers performing every night during the season from October to April. They cover an area from Kasaragod District in North Kerala to Uttara Kannada District in Karnataka. Two distinct styles remain, Northern and Southern. They differ in costume and make-up, dance technique and musical rendering, while they share the same basic performance style and textual base. Changing patterns of patronage gave rise to the emergence of two types of troupes, temple troupes and commercial troupes, both of which are very successful. Temple troupes give performances in fulfilment of a vow sponsored by an individual or a group. Commercial, ticket-selling troupes exist since the 1950s. They perform in large public spaces where they draw good audiences.

Patronage has always been crucial for the organization of troupes and their repertoires. Of late the spread of literacy and the popular media, in particular television, have influenced both what is being performed and how it is performed. While the new patterns of patronage and Yakshagana’s soaring popularity show that the survival of this art form is not at stake, its face is changing under the impact of the overall cultural and social developments. Thus, transmission remains a core issue concerning the continuity of the tradition.

As far as we know, Yakshagana has always been a hereditary art and a mixed caste affair only in part. Unlike other South Indian performing traditions, there were no exclusive castes of performers or communities whose duties included performing. However, there is evidence that certain Brahmin communities were involved in the theatre as musicians; yet other Brahmins refrained from even watching a performance. Most other performers came from agricultural groups at the lower and middle level of the social hierarchy. There was no compulsion for a son to follow in his father’s footsteps, yet to this day many performers have a father or uncle who was also a performer and there are several families with a long history of famous performers. Dalits and other castes held in low esteem continue to be excluded from participation in certain temple troupes.2

Below I will look at the transmission and mastering of the ‘performance’ (including all practical aspects of music, dance, make-up and performance techniques) and the ‘text’ as two separate issues, even though they do often overlap.

Informal ways of transmission prevail even today. Interested boys join a troupe at a fairly early age. There are no classes for the newcomers. Learning relies upon watching, copying and trying out. Sometimes one of the troupe members shows some steps or teaches a tala or song. I prefer to call this mode of learning practical because it involves more than just visual and verbal elements; it is very much a ‘learning by doing’ approach. In contrast to aspiring actors, aspiring singers or drummers receive more conventional instruction that continues in the guru’s house during the rainy season.

The practical mode of learning is organic in the sense that it allows ‘growing up with’ and ‘growing into’ the art form. It is systematic to some extent and moves through the preliminary dances and characters of purvaranga to minor characters before specializing in particular roles and character types. The dances of purvaranga comprise tals and a large variety of important steps, in addition to characters ranging from the comic (kodangi) and heroic (kedage mundale) to female roles, thus exposing the youngsters to the basics of Yakshagana.

Today purvaranga has been shortened to the extreme. Its components are no longer convenient ‘training dances’ and the knowledge about their performance and meaning are lost.

Before India’s independence in 1947, village schools (aigala matas) provided a kind of basic education. The texts of Yakshagana prasangas were used as reading and writing exercises and memorized in their entirety. This contributed to the survival of this genre of poetic literature, in particular because stage performances used only parts of the texts. Today the village schools are defunct and the texts are not transmitted in this non-performance context any longer. However, they may be studied at the college level as part of classes on the history of Kannada literature.

For centuries, texts in the ‘yakshagana style’ were recorded on palm-leaf manuscripts. We know little about the popularity and distribution of these texts, but there must have been a rather large number of them and they appear to have been widely known. Starting in the 1920s, a large number of prasangas have been printed and sold as inexpensive booklets to the literate public. The first decades saw the printing of the traditional episodes, usually without any reference to authors, sources or editing processes. Most of these early editions are now unfortunately out of print. Similar books and booklets of new prasangas written in the 1960s to 1980s are available today.
Furthermore, ‘performance scores’ complete with verses and dialogues exist as hand-written notebooks in the possession of performers. They serve as memory-aids and as resources for young performers who sometimes copy them partially or in their entirety. Copies of commissioned works for commercial troupes (every troupe will have one or two new plays per season) exist only in the form of photo-copies.

Tala M addale is a text-centred variant of Yakshagana. It has no stage-action, dance and make-up, but focuses instead on the sung verses and spoken dialogues. Tala M addale exhibits the trend towards intellectualization: while it used to be the pastime of performers and villagers during the rainy season, it has now become the playground for the educated, urbanized, upper-middle class. Tala M addale provides a way for young performers to pick up the conventions of dialogue-building and to sharpen their rhetoric skills. Contrary to the common notion, the dialogues are not improvised in the narrow sense of the word. Conventions for dialogue-building include common interpretations of characters and scenes, interpolated stories and jokes, fixed formulae for recurring situations, such as forms of address, taking leave, and arguments.

Yakshagana schools or centres founded after the 1970s aim to establish a formal basis of transmission. The centre for the Southern style is located in Dharmasthala, where renowned performers provide classes during the rainy season. In addition to the school run by the Hegde family in Idagunji, the institution for the Northern style is the Yakshagana Kendra in Udupi. As I have been a casual student there myself since 2001, I will use it as an example here.

The Udupi institution was founded in 1968 by Kota Shivarama Karanth, a Kannada writer, thinker and artist, who himself taught at the school. Karanth started the school because he disapproved of the direction the art was taking. With his scholarly work on Yakshagana and the training centre he brought the tradition to the attention of local and international scholars at a crucial moment. Not only the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi recognised Yakshagana as an art form, but so did the local urban educated population. Dr. Karanth made Yakshagana acceptable for the emerging middle class. His experiments with a Yakshagana ‘ballet’ form were controversial, but plays in this style are still successful abroad.

The boys joining the one year course are from all kinds of homes. When interested, a student can apply with a letter, stating his background and motivation. Around fifteen students are selected on the basis of an interview and preliminary exercises testing their rhythmic and physical abilities. Teachers, senior and junior students live together under one roof sharing chores and meals in a kind of gurukula mode. The classes start in June and close with the Annual Festival in April. The earlier directors, Karanth and K. S. Haridas Bhat, laid down plans for systematic training. The morning session starts at 8.45 A.M. with a short prayer before the Gods in the main class room. It culminates in the Ganapati stuti and arati, resembling the ceremony in the green-room before a performance. The morning session from 9 to 11.30 A.M. and the afternoon session from 2 to 4.30 P.M. are divided into music and dance classes. After class there are a number of other activities, such as lessons in bhajan singing, Kannada epics, rehearsals and practice. During the one-year course, the students are exposed to all the aspects of the art, the tradition of versatile artists being thus continued.

From learning the tala syllables and the concept of laya, they move to clapping the seven talas in the two ‘times’ (kala or speed). Under the tutelage of Principal N. Lakshminarayana Rao or one of the junior teachers they are introduced to the first ragas. Singing of songs is learned in a very practical manner. For the common combinations of raga and tala there are ‘model songs’. These are from various episodes and poets. Once the student has learned these, he can adapt new verses to the appropriate pattern of these songs. A profound knowledge of the rising and descending scales of particular ragas is not imparted.

An important difference between learning at the Yakshagana Kendra and the informal way of learning in a troupe is that the students of the school have to write down the talas and songs. This is done in a notation designed by the early Gurus of the Kendra. While practising their first plays, they will also write down dialogue lines and learn them by heart. At the end of the one year’s course, they will possess one or more notebooks. Renowned Bhagavata N. Ramakrishnayya has authored a primer of Yakshagana, Yakshagana Svabodhini (‘Yakshagana self-taught’), which serves as a reference book.

The hardest part for all students seems to be the rendering of dialogues. It requires skill and experience to get the right pitch and the appropriate melody, acquire a repertoire of conventional formulae, master the Sanskritized vocabulary and maintain a suitable body posture.

Some students continue training for a second year, usually to become drummers or Bhagavatas. The latter practice under the tutelage of Bhagavata Goripadi Vitthal...
veshadhari designations were troupes and schools. The recent trend of intellectualisation of Yakshagana gives rise to debates that are dominated by others than the ‘common’ performers. However, it is in these circles that the authority is claimed for defining what Yakshagana ‘really’ is, its history, what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. One must realize that too much definition will limit the art’s expressive possibilities and creative development. The same danger is inherent in the institutionalization that started with the Yakshagana schools. As it is, the art is very flexible, a flexibility which is at the core of its potential to survive. Yet this flexibility has also fostered developments leading to the loss of certain aspects. Because Yakshagana opened the stage for new stories, the characteristics of the ‘traditional’ ones lost importance or simply became obsolete. The preference has shifted to stories like local epics (mahatmyas) or stories of local heroes and deities. And at the commercial extreme you find Yakshaganas based on popular film plots.

The need to survive makes Yakshagana dependent on audience tastes. These seem not to favour lengthy devotional dances before the story starts; therefore, purvaranga and curtain entrances have been curtailed or done away with. The new stories have new heroes. Villains are no longer necessarily demons, so the impressive demon apparel and this character’s characteristic movements and speech have become obsolete. Most striking is the vanishing of the characteristically shaped head-dresses of the Northern style (mundasus) from the commercial stage. Although they are heavy and complicated to tie, their disappearance is not totally understandable, as it is precisely the shape of these head-dresses that has become the popular symbol of Yakshagana. Lastly, the Yakshagana Kendra teaches “tradition”, but its present dance teacher and artistic director, Sanjeeva Suvarna, also works to improve Yakshagana’s aesthetic appeal and expression. The divide between ‘tradition’ and the stage of the commercial groups has become so large that it appears at times somewhat arbitrary to teach students ‘traditional things’, which they have to unlearn again once they join a professional troupe.

In addition to the world of professional troupes the existence of innumerable Yakshagana laymen’s (and women’s!) clubs and the fact that schools include brief Yakshagana shows as part of their Annual Day Celebrations, add much to the liveliness of the ‘scene’.

The traditionally oriented curriculum contributes to the survival of aspects such as the purvaranga, which are rarely performed outside. A part from that, the Kendra has successfully established standards of teaching and performance that ensure a basic quality of both. Troupe managers count on this and recruit a good share of the students trained there every year. The formalization into a ‘certificate course’ under the roof of an established Pre-University College has also contributed to the rise in prestige both of the art and of the graduates.

Assessing the overall developments within Yakshagana, one can state that the status of the theatre and the social esteem for the performers has increased. New ways of transmission and learning have played a major role here. Yakshagana was brought to the attention of the regional intelligentsia by the right persons and at the right time. Karanth’s name, and his ‘interference’, established it as an art form. Yakshagana has become an ‘icon’ of local identity and regional culture and has successfully attracted new patrons who also take an interest in the training. Perhaps as an offshoot of the intellectual attention, the performers have started to refer to themselves and are referred to as kalavidaru, ‘artist’. Earlier designations were atadavaru (players) or meladavaru (those belonging to a meña or troupe), or more specifically veshadhari (one who puts on/wears vēsha or costume and makeup), which, for different reasons, are considered somewhat derogatory terms. But irrespective of the name by which they are called, for those directly involved in the theatre Yakshagana is foremost a job: a family cannot live off fame only.

Yakshagana has its share of problems: for example, there are caste problems among performers and rivalries among troupes and schools. The recent trend of intellectualisation of Yakshagana gives rise to debates that are dominated by others than the ‘common’ performers. However, it is in these circles that the authority is claimed for defining what Yakshagana ‘really’ is, its history, what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. One must realize that too much definition will limit the art’s expressive possibilities and creative development. The same danger is inherent in the institutionalization that started with the Yakshagana schools. As it is, the art is very flexible, a flexibility which is at the core of its potential to survive. Yet this flexibility has also fostered developments leading to the loss of certain aspects. Because Yakshagana opened the stage for new stories, the characteristics of the ‘traditional’ ones lost importance or simply became obsolete. The preference has shifted to stories like local epics (mahatmyas) or stories of local heroes and deities. And at the commercial extreme you find Yakshaganas based on popular film plots.

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Dance class - basic steps practiced in a row

Pateel, now more than 80 years old. They go through a large number of the old and popular prasangas to acquire a basic repertoire and experience in rendering. The Guru, who knows an incredible number of prasangas by heart, also explains the ‘way’ (nade) of the episodes, i.e. the stage-conventions, which is important since the Bhagavata is a kind of on-stage director. In addition to the ‘oral resource’ represented by the Gurus, the small library of traditional prasangas is sought after, making the Kendra a meeting point for young and experienced artistes alike.

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Demon character
Creativity and Tradition: Two Different Worlds?

AN OUTSIDER’S VIEW ON EDUCATION IN THE PERFORMING ARTS IN INDIA

Evelien Pullens

The musicians are playing a strong melody. A student comes in and sings loud, clearly a complicated song. He dances in a circle with fast steps. The teacher corrects him. He shows how he should do the steps and the student does it again.

It is fascinating to join the Kattaikkuttu rehearsals with thirty enthusiastic children of the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School. Kattaikkuttu, or Kuttu, is a traditional music theatre from Tamil Nadu. Though I don’t understand the Tamil language I never get bored of the strong emotional way of singing of Kuttu. I enjoy the energy of the steps and the acting that goes along with the music. Good Kuttu performances have a high energy level and have different layers, ranging from profound religious songs to light, humorous and at times banal jokes. As a foreigner educated in a country without many traditional roots, I am attracted by this colourful, meaningful theatre. In Kuttu I find elements that most theatre makers in the West have lost. What are those? Is it the connection with religion and rituals? The unity and duration of a Kuttu play? The beautiful costumes?

I had my theatre education at the Art and Drama School in Utrecht in Holland. My training concentrated basically on creativity and improvisation. ‘Learning by experience’ has a high value in modern European drama training. The underlying idea is that everything you can possibly express exists in yourself. In modern theatre we are not looking for a repetition of what has already been done, but we are looking for new creative ideas. Though we had a lot of fun at the Drama School and made enriching experiences and playful discoveries, the artistic work felt sometimes meaningless, without any base.

When I began to follow Bharata Natyam lessons in Holland I was confronted with a completely different system of teaching. First I had to learn the basic steps before we could even start learning a dance. To add some creative input became only possible after the arangetram.

Notes

1 The following text mostly refers to the Northern style, although much of it is true for the Southern style as well.

2 In 2004, performers from the billava community (classified as backward class/caste) protested against their discrimination to perform in the famous Mandarti (and Maranakatte) troupes. They obtained a partial success. An initially all-Dalit troupe now employs performers from all caste backgrounds.

The Yakshagana Kendra has been holding regular weekend and holiday classes for children, teenagers and adults with overwhelming response. This amateur scene generates a broad interest and an engaged community of aficionados, thus securing future patronage and sponsorship for the professional troupes and a public interest in the survival and transmission of the Yakshagana tradition of coastal Karnataka.

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Puppetry workshop with Evelien Pullens for the students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam December 2003.