Abstract: Kattaikkuttu also known by the other names Kuttu and Terukuttu is lively flexible Tamil folk theatre tradition. This paper documents the Tamil Nadu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarchi Munnetra Sangam in Kanchipuram an organization founded by Kattaikkuttu actor P. Rajagopal along with sixteen other performers and Hanne M. de Bruin an indologist from the Netherlands. The focus of the paper is to reflect over the effects of Kattaikkuttu and Kattaikkuttu training on the personal development of the young students conducted by the Sangam.

In 2003 I visited the Tamil Nadu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarchi Munnetra Sangam in Kanchipuram to investigate Kattaikkuttu and the ways in which this theatre links up to several different development issues. The Sangam promotes Kattaikkuttu and protects the cultural and economic position of its exponents. The organisation was founded by Kattaikkuttu actor P. Rajagopal, together with sixteen other performers and Hanne M. de Bruin, an Indologist from the Netherlands.

The Sangam established the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School in 2002 with the objective to educate and train children, belonging to socio-economically deprived families, in Kattaikkuttu and deliver a new generation of performers so as to ensure the continuity of the tradition. The School is based on the gurukulam system: the students stay overnight in the hostel of the School and they are tutored in life and in Kattaikkuttu following the vision of the head teacher, P. Rajagopal. This is the first time that girls participate in professional Kattaikkuttu training.

In this essay I will look in particular into the effects of Kattaikkuttu and Kattaikkuttu training on the personal development of the young
students of the School. How does Kattaikkuttu affect their lives? To address this question I conducted interviews with Kattaikkuttu actors and musicians, students of the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School, committee members of the Sangam (who are also performers), relatives of the performers and students, sponsors of Kattaikkuttu performances and spectators, in addition to observing what was going on in daily practice.

Kattaikkuttu is a lively and flexible South Indian performance tradition. The theatre can be characterized as a musical form of theatre, because of its use of dialogue, music, dance, and singing. Its regular, all-night performances are based on the Paratam (the Tamil version of the Mahabharata). Performances are especially popular in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu. The costumes and make-up vary from very extravagant and elaborate for the divine, royal and demonic characters to simple for the mundane characters, such as the Kattiyakkaran (clown). The male, royal/divine characters, called kattai veshams, usually wear coloured, wooden ornaments, which are decorated with small mirrors, on their heads, ears, shoulders and chests. These wooden ornaments are called kattai camankal, from which the name of the theatre derives. The melodramatic acting style of the royal/divine characters can be characterized by ornate, heroic and elevated songs, emotional dialogues, heavy use of voice, simple and fixed but energetic dance-steps, and grotesque mimics. The acting style of the mundane characters, in contrast, is less stereotypic and can be distinguished by an everyday use of language, flexible and loose movements, humour and (self) mockery (De Bruin 1993, 117-118).

Knowledge and skills of Kattaikkuttu have largely been transmitted from generation to generation in an oral and informal manner. The training is nevertheless very intensive. When a young student wants to become familiar with the profession, he usually joins a theatre group between his tenth and eighteenth year. There’s where he will imitate more experienced actors and where he starts to learn the repertoire, while helping with all kinds of jobs. At first he sings in the choir, then he can play the cymbals and subsequently he is allowed to play some small parts (De Bruin 1993, 131). An experienced actor usually knows all the parts of the whole repertoire (about twenty-five plays). According to P. Rajagopal, playing the role of the Kattiyakkaran is a good way to learn Kattaikkuttu, because this character is almost always on stage and also because of his question and answer dialogues with the other characters.

The training process of young children (below the age of 14) working as trainees in a professional theatre company violates the Indian law on child labour. The Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School (KYTS) tries to break with the habit of employing children as child-actors in companies.
to learn the profession by providing basic education in combination with Kattaikkuttu training. Regular education stimulates the students to develop their abstract thinking, verbalisation and writing skills. This will hopefully help them to improve their position as Kattaikkuttu performers in the future.

In the field of cultural production in Tamil Nadu, the cultural elite distinguishes itself by giving preference to classical forms of art, such as Bharata Natyam and Carnatic music. The elite sees Kattaikkuttu as a form of popular theatre without refinements and therefore as not belonging to the legitimated culture. The Kattaikkuttu actors are believed not to be able to produce a “high standard” theatre, because of their lack of formal education (De Bruin 1999, 94). The oral and flexible character of the theatre tradition receives little appreciation and is sometimes contrasted with the “contemporary” theatre based on written scripts; performances are labeled as “pre-modern” or “obsolete” forms of expression. The elite does not always recognize that oral literacy can be as poetic and elevated as written literacy. This practice of exclusion corresponds with Bourdieu’s ideas that the verbal and written habitus of the dominant classes is always privileged and that writing skills are the only means to get access to the cultural establishment (Bourdieu 2003, 255).

Knowledge in an oral tradition is, according to Kersenboom (1995, 145), deeply rooted in both skill and familiarity. That’s why the regular education courses of the School focus on the development of theoretical knowledge and the Kattaikkuttu and musical courses focus on the development of practical and familiar knowledge. In other words, the gurukulam format of the School retains the informal, practical and oral learning process of the tradition, in order to develop the children’s creativity and self-confidence and in order to incorporate Kattaikkuttu in their physical and intellectual system. It is at this point that the “know”, “can” and “recall” meet (Kersenboom 1995, 144-145).

In addition to regular Kattaikkuttu training, the School organizes interdisciplinary workshops, for instance, on photography, modern dance, puppet theatre and Kathakali, to acquaint its students with other art and theatre forms. The enhancement of interdisciplinary competences will hopefully develop the self-reflection of the students and will give them some aesthetical dispositions, necessary in the struggle for a better position in the field of cultural production in Tamil Nadu. One successful interdisciplinary example was the photography course held in July 2004. The workshop enabled the children to reflect on their surroundings and to visually record aspects of it. For the first time they were on the other side of a visualisation process. They learned how to look through a frame, how to manipulate colours and how to influence the composition of an
image. The students appeared to be very talented in developing a critical eye and their vocabulary had grown with a number of words (‘focus’, ‘light’, ‘dark’) (www.kattaikkuttu.org).

In a recent publication Joost Smiers promotes cultural diversity in the arts as a way of safeguarding a more democratic society (Smiers 2003). According to Smiers the arts are under pressure, because of the ongoing influence of globalisation. The arts are essential forms of communication in a democracy characterised by the possibility to hear different opinions and visions; they are necessary to respond to the many questions that life poses. In order to preserve diversity in expressive forms and communication channels, we need to support in particular local forms of art. Furthermore, the arts offer the ability to reflect on and criticize our daily complex reality; this in turn helps people to deal with problems, to escape from oppressive mechanisms and dominant opinions of society. Lastly, the arts also help people to relax. Besides its relevance for its consumers, I think art is also very important for the development of the performers. For art can be a means for an artist to cope with the world—to express himself in an alternative way. Art is therefore not a luxury product but an essential need.

What then is the relevance of theatre as a representative of the arts? Scholars have highlighted the importance of different aspects of theatre: it can empower people’s cultural identities, raise awareness, stimulate them physically or emotionally or explain their surroundings. Anjum Katyal discusses the impact theatre has on the personal development of individuals. Kidd states that theatre can play a psychological role and an analytical role (Kidd 1992, 111). The psychological role of theatre concerns people’s self-confidence and their learning, communication, social and physical skills. The analytical role of theatre, on the other hand, questions dominant views in society. Ralph Yarrow states that theatre is pivotal in conceptualising contempt, because it visualizes contempt in the here and now. He states that the audience understands reality better when it is visualized and placed in a physical context. Consequently, theatre makes an alternative vision on subject, object, the world, the self and the other possibilities? (Yarrow 2001, 193). To envisage the relevance of theatre and development, I have used an alternative development approach. This approach is concerned with the factors that favour the creation of conditions in which people have real opportunities of judging the kind of lives they would like to lead (Sen 1999, 63) rather than with following the mainstream Western model of development, which focuses primarily on economic progress and income generation following while ignoring other deprivations. Alternative development aims at the improvement of people’s wellbeing. In this development approach it is
essential that local culture, knowledge and capacities are respected and empowered and that people participate in the development project at stake. Taking this alternative approach to development as my starting point I will discuss which elements of Kattaikkuttu my respondents perceived to have a positive or a negative effect on the wellbeing of the students of the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School.

I made a list of criteria to measure the developmental value of theatre, based on Yarrow (2001, 193), Prentki (1998) and Katyal (1999, 2). Prentki’s and Yarrow’s criteria mostly concern social development, i.e. the development of whole groups. They include: giving specific communities a voice: emancipation, creating a (fictional) “safe” environment, showing an alternative on reality and teaching people how to interact with different social groups. Katyal’s criteria mostly concern personal development (Katyal 1999, 2). Theatre improves learning skills (concentration, memory training, vocabulary enlargement, creativity development), communication skills (speaking in public, expression skills, interaction), social skills (co-operation, discipline), character development (self-confidence, self-esteem, responsibility, sensitivity, learning how to share) and physical development (body control, sense of space and condition building). I have added several cultural development criteria to the criteria provided by these scholars, because I believe that, following Smiers, the culturally empowered can respond in their own way to the multitude of questions life raises and, consequently, stimulate the democratic debate. These additional criteria are: empowerment of cultural identity, understanding one’s own culture and society and that of others and intercultural competences.

When comparing the observations and the answers of my respondents to the criteria identified above, Kattaikkuttu contributes enormously to the personal development of the students. Their communication and social skills have improved greatly since they joined the Kattaikkuttu School, as stated by the interviewed teachers, parents and students. The students have developed their expression and interaction skills, they have learned how to work together and they have become a little more disciplined. Because of Kattaikkuttu’s memory, vocabulary and creativity training, the learning skills of the students have improved a lot according to the respondents. However, many respondents were critical of learning Kattaikkuttu in a theatre company, because it implies child labour. The long working hours and the weight of the costumes in particular were seen as having a negative effect on the physical condition of the trainees and (adult) performers in general. On the other hand, the all-night performances offer students the possibility to learn how to use their body and how to relate their body to the spatial
surroundings. That is why hands-on experience in a company remains an essential part of the training of a professional performer. To counteract these negative effects, the implementation and continuation of the gurukulam system as followed by the School, according to the informants, is recommendable. The most positive and most demonstrable contribution of Kattaikkuttu to personal development is the strengthening of students’ self-confidence and self-esteem. One on the female students, K. Suganya explained to me for example that she liked Kattaikkuttu, because it helps her to develop her “courage” and her “speaking skills”. My research points out that Kattaikkuttu unquestionably leads to empowerment of the performing participants. Kattaikkuttu emancipates individuals.

In addition, involvement in Kattaikkuttu has positive effects on the social development of students. For it allows them to see or to try out alternative worlds during a performance, for instance by donning an ‘opposite gender’ role. P. Tilagavthi, a talented 13 year old girl coming from a socially and economically excluded family, for example, had the chance to play a medical doctor in the Magic Horse. She said she enjoyed it very much to wear a white coat and to play such an educated character. These ‘alternatives’ have positive effects on the emancipation of whole groups, such as girls, boys, homosexuals, low castes, immigrants, religious minorities and students who are in any way different. Kattaikkuttu empowers these groups to speak out and to improve their social position. However, my research also shows that involvement of girls in Kattaikkuttu may have negative effects on their wellbeing and their social development. Regular performances often do not offer alternative views on the everyday-life realities of these girls, nor do they offer emancipative impulses. The unequal gender relations shown in the regular performances are more frequently affirmed than criticized. This inequality is, however, gradually changing. In contrast, the gurukulam of the School does help to empower the female students by giving them alternative roles, such as doctors or powerful wizards embodied as typical kattai veshams.

In order to make an alternative world possible the school creates a “safe environment”. Students, teachers, actors and relatives all claim that the theatre school is a pleasant setting. The students find the teachers of the gurukulam friendly and accessible. They prefer the gurukulam system to the government schools, because their opinion is appreciated. S. Aiyappan, one of the students, stated that the main difference between a government school and the gurukulam is that the gurukulam is “peaceful”, while teachers in the government schools “beat the children”. M. Selvi, a neighbour of the theatre school, said she found it very special that the teachers act on an equal basis with the students. The teachers play along with the children, and at the same time their authority is respected. One
of the relatives, S. Prema, a mother of two students, described the
difference between the government school system and the gurukulam
system as follows: I think this school is better than the government school....
My children study hard in this school and their character and self-esteem is
improving. I sent my youngest daughter to the government school first. She kept
on crying all day. She even had a fever, because of the school. That's why we sent
her to the gurukulam. Now she is happy. I think it is because in the government
school there are too many children in one class room, like goats. The gurukulam
clearly offers a safe environment for children who are different.

P. Rajagopal, the artistic director of the School, explained the safe
environment as follows: .... The children get a lot of attention. The teachers
explain very slowly, so that everyone understands. In the government school the
teachers don't look for eye-contact. Here every teacher has eye-contact. “Look at
me. I can tell you this and that. Do you understand?” “Yes”, the children say.
Only then you can tell something new. In a gurukulam, the teacher is like a
father. I tell the children that they can call me “Rajagopal”, “father” or
“grandfather” or “teacher”, whatever they wish, as long as they study hard! No
distraction and looking around in class. They decided to call me “Tata”—
“Grandfather”. I said: “OK, call me grandfather, but study seriously”.

Finally, involvement in Kattaikkuttu contributes to the cultural
development of the students and others involved. Their cultural identity
is strengthened by participating in Kattaikkuttu performances. Tilagavathi
said she didn't understand Kattaikkuttu performances at first. Since she
is involved in Kattaikkuttu, however, she greatly appreciates the
mythological stories. This kind of cultural empowerment, in return,
generates artistic plurality that improves democracy (Smiers 2003, 83).
The performances also provide students with tools to understand their
own complicated society and culture, as well as other societies and
cultures. The theatre handles moral, psychological and social themes the
students have to deal with every day of their lives. By visionalizing these
themes and daily problems, the students feel empowered. It helps them
to solve their problems. Improvement of intercultural competences as a
consequence of participating in Kattaikkuttu can not yet be determined.
The interdisciplinary workshops at the gurukulam are, however, very
promising.

I can conclude by saying that all respondents acknowledged the
advantages that their involvement in Kattaikkuttu offered to develop their
personal and cultural capacities and obtain a better social position, thus
giving them more freedom to achieve what they considered important in
life. However, the regular theatre’s physical burden and its sometimes
repressive imaging of women appear to have negative effects on the
wellbeing of the students. On the other hand, the holistic, heterogeneous and open minded gurukulam system of the School helps the students, and girls in particular, to strengthen their self-reflexive capacities, their cultural identity, their social interaction skills, their self-esteem and their critical thinking. The gurukulam is a safe environment where students who are in any way different feel empowered to create an alternative world.

Notes

1 The term Kattaikkuttu will be used here, according to the preference of the interviewed performers, and following the outcome of the debate, introduced by De Bruin, about the naming of the theatre (De Bruin 2000). The other much-used names of the theatre are Kuttu and Terukkuttu.

2 For more information on the “orality” of Kattaikkuttu, see De Bruin 1999, chapter 6.

3 In spite of the Indian law against Child Labour still 14% of the 400 million Indian children work everyday. See also: http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/india.html and http://www.childinfo.org/eddb/work/database.htm

References


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