

**Sub-Regional Experts Meeting in Asia on Intangible Cultural Heritage:
Safeguarding and Inventory-Making Methodologies**
(Bangkok, Thailand, 13-16 December 2005)

**Transmission and Transformation of Intangible Cultural Heritage
My Experience in the World of Performing Arts**

**By Gopal Venu
Director**

**Natana Kairali (Research and Performing Centre for Traditional Arts)
Ammannur Chakyar Madhom**

The complex and vast spectrum of the performing arts of India handed down from generation to generation from teacher to student is preserved mainly from 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 masters. This system of preservation of what "the oral and intangible heritage of humanity" through family tradition has almost come to an end.

In the second half of the twentieth century, public and private institutions have taken over the task of giving training in various arts. 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 artforms are suffering from the decline in skill and potency of their artistes and in the meanwhile patronage and public interest in the artforms continue to diminish. 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.

Kerala, the southernmost part of India can justly be proud of its rich performing arts tradition, of volume and variety. In every nook and corner of this land we see a multitude of folk forms, all of them intimately related to the sense of beauty of the common people, realities of social life and rites and customs of the communities. Side by side with these art forms we have also highly sophisticated classical arts such as Kutiyattam(Sanskrit Theatre), Kathakali (dance drama), Mohiniyattam(classical dance) etc. In the olden days, the temples in Kerala were the cultural centres of the region. But today most of the temples do not have a favourable attitude to even provide venues for performances.

It will be an irrecoverable loss to world culture if the rare and traditional knowledge which is oral, difficult to comprehend and intangible since it is stored in the recesses of the human mind, is not transmitted into modern life times.

I travelled across Kerala in the first half of the seventies to enquire if it were possible to work out a plan to rejuvenate those art forms within the constraints of one's surroundings. I would like to recall my experiences of the past three decades in this area of work.

KUTIYATTAM- Sanskrit Theatre

In our experience, we are now totally convinced that a training system similar to the ancient

Gurukula system of old, while still meeting the requirements of the present societal and economic climate, is possible; that in fact, only through such intimate relationship between teacher and disciple, can such knowledge be transmitted.

We became convinced that the loss of Kutiyattam, being the oldest surviving Sanskrit theatre tradition in India, would be an inexorable dearth for our culture as well as for humanity as whole. Natana Kairali 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, (story telling) while Nangiar women of the Nambiar caste could perform female roles in Kutiyattam and in the female solo drama, 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 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 being to conduct 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, 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 Natana Kairali began researching various performing arts and their future, what came as a shocking truth was that many renowned artists had no opportunities to teach only 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 have no chances 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 Natana Kairali. 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 the greatest living exponent of Kutiyattam today was performing as part of the family profession (adiyantiram) in temples and spent all his time in Irinjalakuda. At the age of fifty-eight, he had neither disciples, nor a Kalari in which 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 another caste at the age of thirty-four.

We were thinking of rejuvenating Kutiyattam with Ammannur Madhava Chakyar as the chief master. Details were collected from the Chakyars about the Gurukula system in order to prepare the lesson plan for training. We conducted several discussions on 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, each batch having a full training period before a new batch could begin training. We accept 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. The Sangeet Natak Akademi (National Academy of Performing Arts) provided financial assistance for the training programme.

Problems...

The challenge of artists trained in the Gurukula system today is that they have no recognized certificate or degree required if they want to secure a job opportunity in any institution. It is therefore imperative that universities and government institutions which conduct examinations and impart degrees, recognize such traditional system of learning. 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. Making Kutiyattam a viable career is a significant challenge - one that we have been working to address all along.

Another key aspect of the Gurukula system is the degree to which sacred, intangible knowledge can be preserved, passed on, and honored 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 she/he reach a mature level of strength and porousness to receive it.

In 2001 Kutiyattam was recognized by the UNESCO as 'A Masterpiece of the oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'- With that has started work towards preserving it. UNESCO, the Department of Culture of the Government of India and the Sangeet Natak Akademi (National Academy of Performing Arts) have together initiated projects to conserve Kutiyattam. Today Ammannur Madhava Chakyar is 89, 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, It was only because the Ammannur Gurukulam, Natana Kairali, and Margi (another institute) had overcome all hurdles and conserved their training centres 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.

In this same working methodology we were also successful in rejuvenating the following art forms which come under the ICH category:

1. Pavakathakali – Glove puppetry which presents the miniature form of Kathakali the classical dance theatre of Kerala.
2. Tolpavakoothu – Kerala's ancient shadow puppet theatre. The puppets are made of deer skin and lighting is done using oil lamps. The performances are based on the Kamba Ramayana composed by the great Tamil poet Kambar.
3. Thiruvathirakali – Group dance of Kerala women..
4. Kakkari Natakam - Folk dance drama form.

Documentation of Mudras in Dance Notation

The most salutary contribution of the classical theatre and dance forms of Kerala such as Kutiyattam, Mohiniyattam and Kathakali is the narration of stories through a system of hand gestures or Mudras. I realised that many rare aspects of the mudras in these artforms could be wiped off from the face of the earth simply for the reason that they have never been inscribed anywhere. They have been sustained only through oral traditions. I tried to evolve a system of inscription to notate this language of gesticulation. Mudras are notated with the help of great masters such as Guru Chengannur Raman Pillai and Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair(Kathakali), Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttyamma and Prof.Satyabhama(Mohiniyattam and Guru Ammannnnur Madhava Chkayar and Guru Ammannur Parameswara Chakyar (Kutiyattam).

The 1081 hand gestures that I had documented in Kathakali and Mohiniyattam have been published. Eight editions have already come out in English and Malayalam. Over a thousand more mudras compiled from Kutiyattam and other artforms are yet to be published. Under normal conditions, this type of research is confined to the academic world.

But what gives me satisfaction is that this work has unexpectedly come down to the ordinary people. Dance students in Kerala and elsewhere as well as connoisseurs now use these notations as a handy reference.

Books by G.Venu on Mudras published

1. Alphabet of gestures in Kathakali – published in 1968 by the author (An introduction to the notation system).
2. Kathakaliyile Kaimudrakal – Published in 1977 by State Akademi for Performing Arts. (Malayalam edition with notations for 373 hand gestures of Kathakali).
3. Mudras in kathakali – Published in 1984 by Natanakairali (English edition)
4. Kathakali Mudra Nighandu – Published in 1994 by dept. for cultural publications, Govt. of Kerala (A dictionary of 587 hand gesture).
5. The language of Kathakali – published in 2000 by Natanakairali (English edition of 587 handgestures).
6. Mohiniyattam – Attaprakaravum Mudrakalum – co-authored by Nirmala Pamiker, published by Natanakairali in 1983, 2004 (Malayalam edition with notations of 207 mudras).
7. Mohiniyattam – The Lasya Dance – published in 1995 by Natanakairali (English edition of the above mentioned book).

Inventory -Making:

Few suggestions..

1. Diverse approaches are needed for different art-forms
2. Extensive research and fieldwork before embarking the rescue operation.
3. Workshops to be conducted to identify the most authentic practitioners in case of performing arts which has very rare opportunities to be performed.
4. Senior Maestros, exponents and practitioners are to be approached and persuaded into becoming part of this process.
5. Every information to be reviewed and discussed by a group of experts which includes practitioners and scholars.
6. Information on all aspects of traditional training systems and other important aspects to be collected.

Books published on Performing Arts which comes under intangible heritage

1. Puppety and Lesser known Dance traditions of Kerala by G.Venu published in 1990 by Natanakairali
2. Into the World of Kutiyattam with the legendary of Ammannur Madhava Chakyar published in 2002.
3. Kathakali Kutiyattam and other performing arts fifty years of Theatrical exploration by G.Venu published by Natanakairali.

About the Author

Gopal 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 Smaraka Gurukulam (training centre for Kutiyattam). His major contributions are his adaptations of Mahakavi Kalidasa's plays Abhijnana Sakuntalam and Vikramorvasheeyam in Kutiyattam. He has authored 13 books on the performing Arts. He has also contributed for preserving certain endangered art forms including the glove and shadow puppetry of Kerala.