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Studies in Kūṭiyāṭṭam: The Living Sanskrit Theatre of Kerala

Kūṭiyāṭṭam is a south Indian cultural form that has never been seriously theorized from within. Unlike medieval Sanskrit *kāvya* or *nāṭaka*, for example, for which we have a rich discursive world of scientific poetics culminating in the great Kashmiri theorists of the ninth to eleventh centuries, Kūṭiyāṭṭam offers us virtually no reflections, internal to the tradition, on the structural components of its artistic program, the nature and meaning of its aesthetic aims, or the various means by which such aims are to be achieved. This is not to say that the “orthodox” *alaṅkāra-śāstra* suffices to provide us with an adequate understanding of, say, the *Hara-vijaya* or the *Naiṣadhīya* or Mūrāri's great play, the *Anargha-rāghava*; it does not. In general, and not only in India, poetic theory stands in an oblique relation to its object of study. Poets and theoreticians are notoriously, and perhaps rightly, suspicious of one another. Still, given the truly staggering richness of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam production and the empirical complexity of the spectator's experience, it is fair to ask how we might begin, inductively, to produce a theory of what we can still see on stage. Such a theory is likely to contain many surprises.

The Kūṭiyāṭṭam performers from the Cākyar and Nambyār communities are fond of saying that their art is continuous with very ancient modes of drama, documented in the *Nāṭya-śāstra* and in later works (including Abhinavagupta's magisterial commentary on the *śāstra*). In this they are no doubt, at least partly, right. Classical modes, specified performance units, and a long series of analytical features do indeed fit well with what we know of the ancient theater. At the same time, I think we can easily show that the standard language of *rasa-dhvani*, which today's performers use unreflectively, does not describe well what happens on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage. More precisely, we can point to radically different meanings triggered by terms such as *rasa* and *dhvani*, as scholars such as K. G. Paulose have noted on the basis of the medieval *Vyaṅgya-vyākhyā* commentary to the two Kulaśekhara plays, *Subhadrā-dhanañjayam* and *Tapatī-saṃvaraṇam*. For example, the commentator tells us that *dhvani*, suggestion, or its analogue *vakrokti*, indirect utterance, refers specifically, and apparently exclusively, to moments in Kūṭiyāṭṭam where the eye-movements (or, at times, also hand-gestures) of the actor indicate a contrapuntal meaning at odds with the overt or literal sense of the verbal text. The attuned spectator, *prekṣaka*, is supposed to be able to read these two contrasting registers. A famous example, also explicated by the twelfth-century commentator Śivarāma, is the conversation between Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa, and Balabhadra in the *Subhadrā-dhanañjayam*, Act II. Here Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa communicate through

silent gestures the latent, “true” meaning, which Balabhadra, following the verbal text alone, cannot fathom. (Sometimes it falls to the Vidūṣaka clown to perform, through audible Malayalam speech, this role of disengaging latent meanings, usually through subtle parodic replication; this feature of the clown’s role deserves a study in its own right. *Mantrāṅkam*, the longest and one of the oldest of the plays, is structured from the start around encoded utterance entrusted to the clown-like figure of Vasantakan.)

In short, *dhvani* in its classic Kashmiri sense may exist in individual verses of the performance text but does not comprise a major part of Kūṭiyāṭṭam aesthetics. One could, however, speak of other powerful kinds of emotional suggestivity present in the way a complete Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance is put together and, above all, in the dramatic climax usually achieved in the final night of a multi-night play; I will come back to this point.

The *Vyaṅgya-vyākhyā*, recently published in a not entirely satisfactory edition, is one of the very few sources we have for exploring the problem of Kūṭiyāṭṭam aesthetics. It offers both a myth of origins linked to Kulaśekhara and precise but relatively laconic interpretations of the two plays in their recorded textual form. We can add to it the Malayalam hand-written copy-books, the *Āṭṭa-prakāram* manuals for performance, which have come down to us through the actors’ lineages and still serve today’s actors, who tend to follow them closely (though not slavishly). These remarkable works are silent on the wider themes of any given performance, but they offer indirect evidence of emphasis and selection in the presentation and organization (actually, reorganization) of the mother-text, if such it is, in live performance. Present-day actors also have much to tell us about how they perceive the possible meanings and effects of their art, on the basis of their own experience and what they have been taught by their masters; as the bearers of this long tradition, they deserve to be closely heard and studied. We depend on their knowledge of the vast body of technical and meta-textual materials relating to all aspects of the performance, including their strong sense of the interrelations between the discrete textual registers—for example, the various acts of Śaktibhadra’s *Āścarya-cūḍāmaṇi*, each of which is seen as a single artistic unit, and each of which extensively quotes and embodies chunks of most of the others.

There are two other important sources for any attempt to understand the performance text. In the fifteenth century or so, an anonymous, harsh critic of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, perhaps from the Payyūr scholarly community, wrote a remarkable attack on this mode of doing Sanskrit drama—the *Naṭāṅkuṣa*, “Goad to an Actor,” an eloquent witness to the way Kūṭiyāṭṭam was enacted six hundred years ago. The *Naṭāṅkuṣa* author presents himself as a conservative, indeed purist and formalist, connoisseur of Sanskrit drama who is shocked by the innovations that take place on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage. More specifically, he pours scorn on the fundamental technique of *pakarannāṭṭam*, that is, the alternation in character and voice by a single actor who signals the transition to another, embedded character by conventional signs. Equally blameworthy, in the eyes of our purist connoisseur, is the *nirvahaṇam* retrospective, which usually occupies the bulk of any full-scale performance (ten out of fifteen nights in the *Āśokavanikāṅkam*, for example). Here the actor takes us

back into the prehistory of the present dramatic moment and shows us in detail the contents of the character's mind, his or her memories, wishes, fantasies, bits of traditional knowledge, remembered mythic narrative, floating *cāṭu* verses, and segments of stories from outside the limits of the play being enacted. The *nirvahaṇam* always reconfigures the evolving sequence of the Sanskrit text, delinearizing its trajectory, jumbling the order of the verses, and reaching toward a climax that is usually quite different from what the author of the play must have intended. Both these features —the heart of the *Naṭāṅkuśa* critique— are central to Kūṭiyāṭṭam as we know it today; they undoubtedly emerged out of a period of creative experimentation on the part of the Cākyars, beginning perhaps around the turn of the first millennium, and associated today with the perhaps mythic figure of King Kulaśekhara Varman. It is not surprising that this radical reworking of the terms of Sanskrit drama generated fierce resistance. As the *Naṭāṅkuśa* author says in his summation: Why can't they simply perform the play as it was written and as it has come down to us in the written texts we have? "Perform in the style laid down by the sage. First, stop interrupting the natural flow of the story. Cut out all these extraneous elaborations. Don't add to what the recorded text gives us. Put an end to the horrible mixture that is like a lotus growing in the open sky. Above all, avoid using another language (that is, Malayalam). Just do things right." (*Naṭāṅkuśa* 7.3).

One might observe that this severe recommendation ignores the fact that breaks in the dramatic progression and expansive elaboration on stage are recognized and sanctioned by the *Nāṭya-śāstra* itself as well as by its great commentator, Abhinavagupta.

Note, however, the accuracy of this critic's list of features in the performance tradition as we know it. Incidentally, he is certainly right about Malayalam overriding, as it were, the original Sanskrit, as we see from the way the *abhinaya* follows the vernacular *Āṭṭaparakāram*. But a close reading of the *Naṭāṅkuśa* clearly shows that its fastidious author must have had a secret love for the distinctive Kūṭiyāṭṭam style. He gives his eloquent *pūrva-pakṣin* opponent, undoubtedly a fictive Cākyar, powerful arguments in favor of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam mode of acting. These include a certain affinity for a Kerala-style Advaita that may indeed color Kūṭiyāṭṭam in its historical evolution —not an Advaita of severe universal oneness but a far-reaching merger of subject and object (also of actor, character, and spectator) that at times breaks down the inevitable distance built into theatrical performance. In this respect, the *pūrva-pakṣin* regularly offers a far more compelling vision of the art than the view that the *siddhāntin*-author ostensibly defends, almost as if the tract as a whole had adopted the *dhvani* technique of utilizing a surface text to hide the more significant level of meaning. It is not by chance that copies of this unusual monograph survived in families who were closely tied to the Cākyars; it seems the Cākyars rightly saw the *Naṭāṅkuśa* as, paradoxically, their own text.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam also has lateral ties to Kerala performance genres of other kinds —Kathakalī, of course, itself probably a derivative of Kūṭiyāṭṭam; but also to the possession-and-revelation genres of Tēyyam and Muṭiyettu. Distinctions among these various domains are critical, and the singularity of Kūṭiyāṭṭam is axiomatic; but the affinities of this art to other south Indian ritual performances come

through in the traditional stories and oral commentaries surrounding Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Indeed, we cannot understand the great full-scale performances without reference to the ritual world that frames them from within: for example, the *Vēṇṇirāṭṭam*, or *Dispersal of Burnt Ash*, by the hero of *Mantrāṅkam*, an archaic survival within this archaic text—a moment of chaotic parody of a ritual that is paradoxically fulfilled by this very parodic excess—takes place in the penultimate morning of a forty-one-day performance and, in effect, conditions and explicates the final climax. *Matta-vilāsam*, the shortest and also the most meta-poetic and reflexive of all Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance texts, is focused largely on just such a volatile conflation of “secular” dramatic and ritualized identities, in this case pertaining to the intensified presence of the mad or drunk god, Lord Śiva, the true subject of the play. Intensification through the momentary merging of actor and character, though theoretically prohibited by, or alien to, the classical Sanskrit theater, may well be one of the fundamental experiences on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage.

In the absence of other discursive or interpretative texts from within the Kūṭiyāṭṭam tradition, we are thrown back, to no small extent, on our own resources as (hopefully) attuned and educated spectators. After having seen several hundred hours of performance on the living stage, including full-scale enactments of nearly the entire repertoire of the Nepathya troupe from Mūlikkuḷam, I think we may be able to formulate questions, and preliminary hypotheses, about the thematic and semantic dimensions that inform these great texts. Virginie Johan has now offered us a detailed and precise grammar of performance, based on profound knowledge of the tradition and a strong analytical approach to the primary elements of structure; she has illuminated the construction of the *Rāmāyaṇa* plays in ways that allow us to perceive their sometimes idiosyncratic mode of composition and their often indirect relation to the Sanskrit source-text. We need, however, to go beyond the analysis of crystalline structural segments in order to address the deeper expressive currents of each major work. One thing can be stated with confidence: the proper unit of study and analysis is the full-scale performance, lasting anywhere from 12 hours to 150 hours, and not its now prevalent modular condensations into the space of two or three hours in a single night. Only the full-scale performance can reveal the complex and subtle web of meanings, within the peculiar textuality of this Kerala art, as they are painstakingly conveyed over many hours of performance. No performance segment can be ignored; every hour—every hand gesture—counts. The slow build-up to a denouement of exquisite, indeed almost unthinkable poetic power requires close attention to the many moments that comprise the artistic whole.

One typical thematic vector can be mentioned even at this early stage of our research. Here is a theatrical tradition that, in stark contrast with the received wisdom about classical Sanskrit theater, has a marked preference for “tragic” conclusions. Every act of the *Āścarya-cuḍāmaṇi*—recall, please, that the individual act is the relevant aesthetic unit—ends in despair, unbearable sorrow, remorse, and mental anguish, with the possible sole exception of the final act describing Sītā’s trial-by-fire. The so-called *Bhāsa plays* (which, however, have nothing to do with Bhāsa), have often been cited, not without reason, as revealing a predilection for

sorrowful conclusions; these plays, including the *Abhiṣeka-nāṭakam* and *Pratijñā-yaugandharāyaṇam*, parts of which are still present in live enactments, are all Kerala-style proto-Kūṭiyāṭṭam texts. The *Śūrpaṇakhāṅkam*, Act II of Śaktibhadra's play, ends with a Tēyyam-like emergence of the disfigured Śūrpaṇakhā on stage and a prophecy of eternal warfare between human beings and demons; not by chance, the verse in which Rāma states this unhappy conclusion was selected by the tradition as emblematic of the play as a whole and as linking this work with the Śāṅkara Advaita. "Romantic" dramas like *Nāgānandam* and *Subhadra-dhanañjayam* move in another direction, eventually harmonizing the agonies of the hero and heroine and allowing, say, for a wedding —although, in the former case, the final act, now almost never performed, the so-called *parakkum kūttu* or "flying performance," focuses entirely on the impossible, agonizing cost of self-sacrifice.

In short, a deeper understanding of the performance texts we have will have to take account of what appears to be a wider south Indian cultural thematic of loss, loneliness, and traumatic self-divinization. Other pronounced thematic emphases can easily be defined. Full-scale performance also makes clear the ontic specificity and autonomy of the theatrical world, set in place by the *puṛappāṭu* entrance-segment, a ritual of movement and dance in which a self-contained universe is created and literally tied down to the stage, only to be taken apart by the main actor in the last moments of the final night of performance.

Fascinating problems concern the model of textuality at work in Kūṭiyāṭṭam as a whole. Everything we have seen suggests that we have, as it were, a set of interlocking "hyper-texts," as Lyne Bansat-Boudon has perceptively suggested; these texts relate to one another in a mode of mutual determination and potential mutual embedding. The classic Mediterranean model of a primary master-text that is subsequently edited, elaborated, and commented upon is probably unsuited to the Kerala tradition generally, in which the supposed primary or originary text may, in fact, be secondary, even in historical terms, to its apparent elaboration on stage. In other words, as we see in many individual cases, the master-text cannot be understood without the enacted commentary on each of its articulated elements. Probably we are dealing with several alternative textual models whose pragmatics in performance constitute a major analytical challenge.

My lectures at EPHE aimed to formulate an initial set of questions as we move more deeply into our study of Kūṭiyāṭṭam —questions relating to the semantic burdens of composition and structure, to the particular expressivity of the *abhinaya* language of eye— and handgestures, to the historical evolution of the tradition from the time of our earliest attestations, to major thematic drives, to the multi-layered and polyphonic textualities evident in each of the performance texts, to the underlying linguistic molding of this art form (is the verbal text more of a Malayalamized Sanskrit, in effect a kind of Malayalam, than Sanskrit itself?), to the internal perspective of this art form on its own origins and distinctiveness, and to the philosophical basis that informs the tradition in mostly non-explicit ways.

I thus proposed four lectures, each of which included visual excerpts from recent Nepathya performances. My endeavor throughout was to suggest a program

for research built around full-scale performances, each seen on its own terms as well as intertextually linked to each of the other plays:

I. Introducing Kūṭiyāṭṭam. The building blocks of performance were defined and illustrated, beginning with the *purappāṭu* or “setting out”, in which the actor creates and populates the universe within which the play will exist. Essential structural elements were described: the *nirvahanam* retrospective, interlocking forms of expressive media (*abhinaya*), the syntax of performance, characterization and the compounding and interchange of dramatic roles (*pakarṇnāṭṭam*), the exposition and elaboration of the Sanskrit text, and so on. An overview of the history of the tradition, including continuities with and divergences from the archaic dramatic tradition in Sanskrit, was seen in relation to the medieval critique of this artistic form in the *Naṭāṅkuṣa*.

II. Deep Seeing: The Nāgânandam of Harṣadeva, Act II. Only rarely performed today, Harṣadeva’s classical play, on a Buddhist theme, is radically reworked in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam mode, which offers a complex meditation on the limits and cost of extreme self-sacrifice. This lecture focused largely on the perspectivism built into this Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance, with actors on stage watching an embedded Kūṭiyāṭṭam play unfold from within the outer dramatic frame. We also considered forms of textual elaboration and explication as seen in episodes from *Nāgânandam*, including the Vidūṣaka-clown’s mordant expansion of the Nāyaka hero’s vision and autobiographical retrospective.

III. Mattavilāsam: Reflections on Origins. The most reflexive of all Kūṭiyāṭṭam texts (and also the shortest in performance, at twelve hours), Mahendravarman’s *Mattavilāsam* presents us with a myth of origins which, in effect, displaces nearly the entirety of the original Sanskrit text. We observed the link between this self-presentation of the art form and the ritual depth achieved through the presence of the god Śiva, in the guise of a drunkard-madman, on stage. Kūṭiyāṭṭam may be set up in order to enable such moments of intense fusion of actor and character within the autonomous ontology of the drama.

IV. Kūṭiyāṭṭam thematics: Love in the Aśoka-vanikāṅkam. One of the highlights of the repertoire is the fifth act of Śaktibhadra’s *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*, a 60-hour performance in which the charming demon Rāvaṇa is fully delineated in terms of his character, self-awareness, fantasies, hopes, fears, and memories. This dramatic masterpiece offers a complex meditation on the meaning of love. I attempted to formulate major themes and ideas implicit in this long performance with the help of selected visual sequences.

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