

Decoding the Primordial Fear and Fury

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The importance of the aural and visual manifestations of folklores were not properly recognized for a long time. Intellectuals, generally ignored them as little traditions as against the grand and glorious great traditions of classical stature. Due to the tireless efforts of anthropologists, historians and art critics, folk forms have now come to the centre - stage in our cultural studies. They have been accepted as important tools to decode the dreams, anguish, aspirations, fear and fury of our ancestors. Folklores, thus, have won a respectable position in our academic circles. Studies and research are forthcoming from our folklorists. It is in this background that we are delighted to receive a new work by an expert, introducing more than hundred folk art forms of Kerala to the general public. The author, Sri. Balakrishnan Koyyal is familiar to all as an expert in this field. His earlier contributions in Malayalam *Keralathile Natankalagal* and *Keralathile Kalaroopangal* were well received. This new work has a wider scope as it addresses the non-malayalee audience too. It embraces a large variety of forms from all walks of society. Popular forms like Chavittunatakam, Kathaprasangam, Pathakam, Velakkali etc. which do not conform to the traditional definition of folk, find a place in this collection. The treatment, though crisp and precise, provides all necessary information of the art-form - the people who are engaged, the area of origin and nature of the form. The elaborate bibliography and glossary will surely be a mine of information for those who wish to pursue the study and research of a particular form.

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UNESCO has rightly identified *Mutiyettu* as one of the earliest specimen of the intangible heritage of humanity. It should be the starting point for our cultural studies. It brings back the memory of our agrarian rural rustic past, our mother earth, our village shrines (*kavu*) and a bye-gone age where in we were inseparable part of this whole nature.

Mutiyettu is an invocation to mother. Our fore-fathers did it by creating her form in the fertile paddy field. This earliest writing is called *kalamezhuthu*. It is the primeval form of painting of Kerala which traces its origin to the early days of the dawn of our civilization. It is the expression of love, fear and aspirations of a community in its infant stage, encoded in mythical and mysterious ritual practices. Kalam stands for the paddy field. After a rich harvest when people were free of work and the fertile land vacant, the community calls the village mother to share their fears and aspirations with her. One's child is seriously ill, another's husband is not loyal, yet another has lost everything in a calamity. There is none else with whom they are free to converse and seek solutions for their problems. The mother-goddess is protective, benevolent, even though furious at times over their omissions. The community contemplates, conceives her form in their minds and transfers the unconscious to line and colours to form an image. First they draw the border line, then start to stretch from the centre to the sides. The process is called writing not drawing as we usually do because the latter holds the stamp of authenticity. They choose the colours from their surroundings. They can distinguish between the day (white) and night (black) and the juncture of both sandhya (red). These were the three primary colours known to the ancient man. Slowly they recognised yellow and green. They were fascinated by the multiple combinations of these five basic colours. They cultivated an unflinching process to produce these colours from natural sources – white from rice powder, black by burning the husk of the corn, yellow from turmeric, green from dried leaves and red from a mixture of turmeric powder with quick lime. This indigenous pattern of colour synthesis is unique to Kerala.

While drawing, the ancient artists seem to have been unaware of the golden rule of painting, i.e. *rupabheda, pramana, bhava, lavanyayojana, sadrsya* and *varnikabhanga*. *Sadrsya* cannot be brought in as they were drawing not the real but the imagined. So mother-goddess will have multiple hands. The

bhagavathy in some cases will have eighteen hands. It can be more, or less. In Vaikom temple in the central Kerala the Bhagavati drawn once in twelve years will have sixty four hands! The mother will hold in her hands everything needed for the community. She will hold different kinds of weapons for the protection of her children from enemies.

The preparation of a Kalam with the figure on it requires a lot of time. This is time consuming, though fascinating. There are two more phases. The second is to invoke the deity to enter the floral dhoolisilpa/dhoolichitra(image/figure drawn in powder). This they do by the recitation of devotional songs praising the deity. This is called thottam(hymn invoking the deity). It is sung with the accompaniment of various musical instruments. The deity enters into the image and gives life to it. The third phase is really theatrical. The deity who has enlivened the silpa requires a medium to interact with her devotees. They pray her to enter into the body of the Komaram to reveal the divine desires as oracles. The process of interaction takes a long time. The Goddess blesses and solves their problems. At the end, the meticulously written figure is erased as the deity has withdrawn from it.

These earlier silpas are not confined to the mother, they wrote the serpents, the hunter (malanayati – siva in the form of hunter), Ganapati, Gulikan (the God of death) and all that attracted their imagination. The whole community was actively involved in the worship. The important point here is that all the folk-forms are expressions of a community in its infant days. They had their motives – it may be fertility, fear of enemies or some irresistible urge to satisfy physical desires. The original symbolism is lost to us. The challenge before us, therefore, is to decode the primordial fear, fury, desire and concerns of our ancestors from the forms they have left for us.

All these were rituals at one time, still they are pieces of art. The criterion to distinguish ritual from art is this - ritual is a dedication to the deity directly. It is a communion between the high-priest and the God. It turns to be a work of art when there is audience. These pieces have now become performances more than rituals. One can take what he needs from them. The aesthetic part of it is the feeling of oneness it generates in the audience. In nowhere else, we do get such strong community feeling. The environmentalists among us can mourn on how we have distanced ourselves from our fore-fathers who lived in full harmony with nature.

It will be wrong to trace the origin of all the folk forms to the ancient rituals. Many emerged from purely secular surroundings. Kakkarassi, Velakkali, Kolkali are examples. They entertained the community, taught them how to laugh and be merry even at their worst calamities.

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This text, I am sure, will serve as a faithful guide for all the lovers of art and culture. The foreigners who flock to Gods own country to get a glimpse on our *theyyams* and *patayanis* will keep this monographs close to their hearts.

This is an important milestone in the long journey of the author. I hope that the success will inspire him to continue the intellectual pursuit more vigorously.

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