Possession, Performance and the Passing of Time: The Global and Historical Contexts for Ritual Theatre in South West India

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Abstract
There is a range of religious performance traditions in Kerala and Karnataka which still occupy an important place in the cultural and spiritual life of communities. They include būta, or spirit worship, and genres described as religious drama, such as Yakshagana and Kathakali. The last of these has been separated out as a globally significant dance-drama style, to be studied by students of performance across the world. The interest of "outsiders" affects the way the traditions are treated in India and can lead to a notional separation between art-form and primitive superstition. Without greater awareness and consideration, the living culture of the region risks being undermined and extinguished.

Keywords: Kathakali, Spirit Worship, Transculturalism

Introduction

Figure 1: Entrance to Angadi House in Northern Karnataka

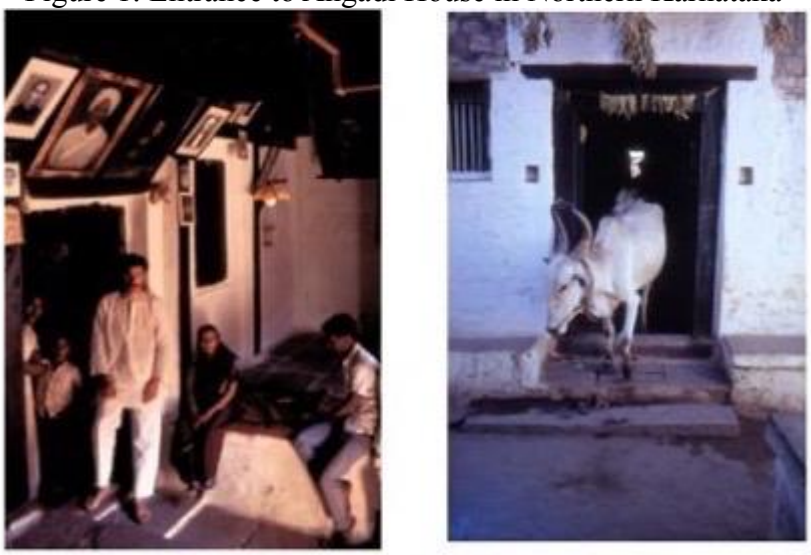

Photo: Author

When recently I began investigating *būta* worship in connection with my research into the history of Western Karnataka, I was suddenly reminded of a moment 50 years earlier. It was during my first visit to my Father's ancestral home in Karnataka. Apart from enjoying the fascination of a dwelling built around the animals - a central core for the draught bullocks, with bells on painted horns, and grey leather skin stretched like tent fabric across their bony frames – there was a labyrinth of dark passages and rooms to explore, some with thick bars of sunlight streaming through wreathes of smoke. In one of these, a tiny space like an open cupboard, I found a stone shelf with half-a-dozen stylised figures, squat statues surrounded by metal ornaments and plaques. After a moment or two, I was bustled out by one of the family, who explained rather vaguely that they were household Gods. At the time I assumed that it must be some prayer room, a private chamber of reverence to supplement the display of forebears, both the living and the dead, in photographs and drawings over the main entrance to the house.

Figure 2: *Būta* Figures From Private Shrines
(These are much finer than the ones in our house.)

Photo: Padmanabhan Sridar who gives permission for use at https://bronzesofindia.com

I now realise that I discovered a *būta* worship room. *Būta,* sometimes translated as "ghost", is used for a very diverse class of spirits that figure in the ritual life of Karnataka. It is hard to describe it simply without reducing it to caricature, but it is best imagined as a small section of the spectrum of Hinduism, which recognises not only the main Gods but also several substrata of lesser deities and spirits, including animistic entities and the ghosts of people who died under inauspicious circumstances. The religion is very much alive in Western Karnataka, not only among simple villagers but also in the great houses of those Kannada estate owners equivalent to today's English landed gentry. These Kannadigas, rich and poor, will go to temples with other Hindus but reserve for their home or village life a special reverence for personal gods, and celebrate at local festivals the complicated histories of human and animal deities associated with Southern and Western parts of Karnataka.

Figure 3: *Būta* Celebrations in 2020 at the Ullalthi Temple at Kelinja in Dakshina Kannada

Photo still from Mangalore Heritage video (mangaloreheritage.com) under fair use policy.

My family came from North Karnataka, not far from Hubli, quite a surprising place for *būta* worship to be found. For this reason, when in the Summer of 2024 I attended a cousin's wedding in England's Home Counties, I was keen to question family members, some of whom I had first met in the village many years ago. What I received from them was a flat denial. *Būta* worship had never been practised in the house. What an absurd idea! Especially as the family were *lingayats,* a monotheistic group of Hindus that generally downplay worship of idols.

Figure 4: Map of Karnataka, Showing (Ringed) Location of Angadi House and the Tulunadu Region

Of course I had not been mistaken, but the family's blanket denial made me aware how far some educated South Indians are embarrassed by any association with the primitive and superstitious. It is parallel to the exasperation I have heard from other relatives, now medical professionals, describing how so many of their Kannada patients prefer propitiating spirits to taking prescription medicines. *Būta* worship might have been part of the fabric of their lives when they were growing up; but becoming a professional meant crossing a boundary into the world of modern science, all the more so if they have crossed continents as well. Kannadigas in the UK now seem to know about *būta* chiefly from the 2022 Kannada film *Kantara.* This film, although set in the modern world, associates *būta* traditions with the forests and hills of Western Karnataka and those inhabitants (often labelled as "Scheduled" or "Backward" tribes) who keep ancient traditions alive. But today's *būta kola,* public happenings, are organised by wealthy and well-educated townspeople and landowners.

Figure 5: *Būta* in a *Guthu*, (Manor House) Showing Medium in a Trance With Hosts and Guests

Photo still from Mangalore Heritage video (mangaloreheritage.com) under fair use policy.

Although the mediums who become possessed by *būta* at these performances belong to castes regarded as "inferior" by most onlookers, they are consulted as authorities on a range of issues from personal health and family affairs to politics and worker relations. The divinity that they have taken on has made them powerful: one anthropologist[1] quotes an observer as saying, "You don't joke with these fellows." *Būta* can be worshipped at household altars, like the one in my Father's house, at local shrines or at gatherings at *guthus,* the grand manorial houses; they can range from private devotions to large scale annual festivals. These last are now promoted as tourist spectacles. There is no embarrassment, it seems, about community tradition, only personal devotion.

However, no such inhibition applies to Kathakali, the religious-theatrical genre found in Kerala some 200 mile to the South. To the outsider, Kathakali shares many characteristics with *būta* worship. Both use stylised drama to connect audiences with the religio-mythical past. Both involve actors infused with the divinity of the Gods and demons. The costumes have close similarities, usually featuring giant circular headdresses made from wood, and they use similarly elaborate make-up and are accompanied by the same deafening music of

[1] Marine Carrin, "L'expérience du surnaturel au Sud-Kanara", *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 145, 2009, Miho Ishii, *Modernity and Spirit Worship in India*, Abingdon: Routledge 2020. Masataka Suzuki (2008). "Bhūta and Daiva: Changing Cosmology of Rituals and Narratives in Karnataka" in SENRI *Ethnological Studies* 71, 9. https://doi.org/10.15021/00002613

drums and gongs. Although the various cultural traditions may have different names, insiders and outsiders immediately recognise their common elements.

But Kathakali is now singled out, recognised globally as a dance-drama style. The New York Times critic Clive Barnes described it as "one of the real epic theaters of the world"[2] on a par with great theatre past and present including that of Ancient Greece and, in more recent times, several dramatic traditions in the Far East.[3] There are coincidental parallels between the histories of Kathakali and Japanese Kabuki, in that both forms crystallised into distinctive theatrical styles around the 17th century, when Kabuki began to play to the sophisticated urban audiences of Edo during the Tokugawa Shogunate, and Kathakali was established as the speciality style of the court of the Rajas of Kottarakara. Although a century ago they were scarcely known outside Asia, now these drama-types, together with certain martial art styles, have assumed prominence in Western theatre studies, including in the training of actor-practitioners. In Europe and America, drama schools include them in their curriculum partly to counteract "the homogenizing tendency of national paradigms."[4] The rigorous training which in India serves to inculcate the stylised posture and movement of the actor-dancer-warrior can also help "Western" performers to develop the techniques of concentration and meditation required for learning the act of performing "from 'inside'."[5] Performers now are more likely to think in terms of "psychophysical involvement" in a performance stimulated by a number of sources of which a conventional playscript may be one. Among the most familiar of these techniques is that associated with the Russian teacher Stanislavski, which has influenced many modern stage and film actors and which is known colloquially as "method acting". Some actors and directors have sought inspiration in "cultural habitus,"[6] not just the performance art of other civilisations, but also the learned body language and thought patterns which communities have developed in both their everyday and ritual lives. Apprentice performers seek to achieve "a kind of liminality,"[7] becoming a new self, with ritualised behaviours that can be "read" by familiar audiences.[8]

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[2] According to Graeme Vanderstoel (2013). Presentation at Indian Arts and International Venues round table at UC Santa Cruz, https://www.facebook.com/groups/kathakali/permalink/663186413702644/?_rd

[3] Organisers of European Festivals tend to make a mental distinction between folklore and "serious theatre". Kathakali, which had a two week run at the World Theatre Season at the Aldwych Theatre in 1972, is certainly assumed to be in the latter category.

[4] Janelle Reinelt and Brian Singleton, "Series Preface" to *Studies in International Performance* series, initiated in 2004 on behalf of the International Federation for Theatre Research, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

[5] "In contrast to representational or mimetic theories of acting that are constructed from the position of the outside observer to the process/phenomenon of acting, my concern is with articulating away of understanding acting from the perspective of the actor as enactor/doer from 'inside' the act of performing." Phillp Zarrilli, "Introduction" in Zarelli, Daboo and Loukes (2013). *Acting, psychophysical, phenomenon and process: intercultural and interdisciplinary perspectives,* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 18.

[6] "Habitus" is a useful term borrowed from sociologists, associated originally with Pierre Bourdieu to describe how individuals self-regulate their own behaviour to fit social expectations. Bourdieu P. (1977). trans. Nice R, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[7] Turner, V. (1969) *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago, Aldine, vii. The term "liminality" more usually applies to the "coming of age" ceremonies when a child is transformed in social terms into an adult. But according to Turner, most societies have "liminal areas of time and space—rituals, carnivals, dramas, and latterly films—[which] are open to the play of thought, feelings and will; in them are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jura l models that control the centers of a society's ongoing life." While the approach might be an interesting take on *būta kola,* Turner connects his study with "preliterate societies" such as his area of study in the Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (preface page v). Modern Karnataka cannot by any means be described as "preliterate."

[8] Leo Rafolt, (2015). "Transcultural and Transcorporal Neighbours: Japanese Performance Utopias in Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Phillip B. Zarrilli", in *Colloquia Humanistica,* 4, 96-7.

Figure 6: The Pandavas Gamble With the Kauravas; a Scene From a Kathakali Performance

Photo Bhoomi on Malayalam Wikipedia (Creative Commons License)

Kathakali fully fits with this notion of acquired performative behaviour and it has led to its being given a place at the high table of trans-cultural eminence. However, from the Indian perspective, this lumping together of great theatres from around the world can feel like a form of "orientalism": a tableau of weird and wonderful art forms that we (Westerners) would all benefit from greater exposure to. Peter Brook, the British director was inspired by Kathakali among other things in his epic stage construction of *The Mahabharata* in 1985. But Brook was interested in "primitivism" globally and attracted some criticism in his choice of an African actor to play the part of Bhima who at the climax of the play devours his rival Dushasanna. It seemed to be alluding, so it was claimed, to popular stereotypes of natives and cannibals.[9]

Figure 7: Bhima's Frenzy From Peter Brook's Production of Mahabharata, 1983

Photo still from video under fair use policy

While touring with a Kerala-state-sponsored Kathakali troupe across Europe in the 1970s, we in the company became aware of a typical audience response in those places where we were greeted with greatest acclaim, in London, for example, some venues in France and Italy, in

[9] David Moody (1995). "Peter Brook's Heart of Light: 'Primitivism' and Intercultural Theatre" in *New Theatre Quarterly*, 11(41), 33-39.

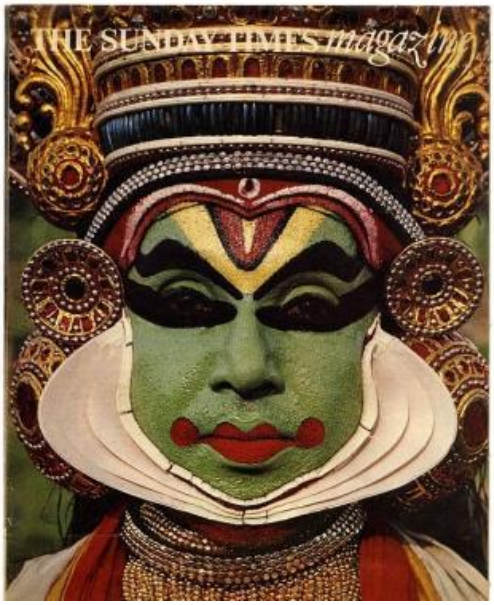
Northern (but not Southern) Spain, and above all in Vienna. The initial reaction was shock, alarm almost. But for those that were able to endure the overpowering sights and sounds, it quickly turned into mesmerised attention. The admiration was nearly all wonder rather than empathy and our shows were received as a transcendental experience, a theatre of alienation.

Figure 8: The Death of Kichika (Kathakali)

Photo: Prathyush Thomas (Creative Commons License)

The juxtaposition of comedy and visceral horror had a deeply unsettling impact on many, especially those who had come expecting to enjoy the decorative charm of Indian dance. In this scene, known as the death of Kichaka, the same superhuman character Bhima, here disguised as a servant, has set a trap to assassinate the lord of the house who has come to seduce his wife. As the life is squeezed out of him, the victim emits a series of astonished squeaks. A moment later blood gushes from his mouth and he dies. Western audiences recognised this as a familiar comic/horror genre.

Figure 9: "The Stars of India" Photographed by David Montgomery for the Sunday Times Colour Supplement June 7th 1970 on Performances at Sadlers Wells Theatre London



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The company enjoyed the adulation and as the tour went on they gradually adapted. The intricate mimed "dialogue" on stage became both more articulated and abbreviated. They could see the parts of the performance that caused the eyes of the audience to glaze over and also those which made them widen in amazement. They extended the splendid sequences, like the opening of *The Mahabharata* and the wedding procession that concludes *The Ramayana* and more lyrical dance sequences such as the interpretation of *The Bhagavad Gita*. And with the almost daily performances over several months, the performers gradually lost their inner role as the embodiment of Gods and heroes. They learned to become jobbing actors, famous actors at that. On returning to India they were treated as film stars, for a time at least.

This development is neither regrettable nor avoidable, but it tends to lift Kathakali out of the cultural context in which it developed. An early 20th century study by K. Bharatha Iyer[10] demonstrates that Kathakali was just one of many performance traditions in South West India: he enumerates more than a dozen forms associated with various ethnic and caste groups, some of which he describes as Tantric cults.[11] One that is prominent today in Western Karnataka today, known as Yakshagana, performed at temple festivals in the coastal region, is sometimes promoted as a Kannada variety of Kathakali. Iyer also notes the part played by the *Kathakali bhranthan* "Kathakali-mad," in sustaining its reputation[12]. They are the elite group of enthusiasts, expert in *mudras,* the gesture language of the mimed narrative, who argue over the performances of rival Kathakali stars rather as Italian *cognoscenti* compare the merits of opera divas. The history of art and music everywhere acknowledges the positive and negative influence of patrons. With Kathakali they became its protectors; in the case of our touring troupe, it had become almost the court drama of a Senior Public servant.

Būta, on the other hand, although much more socially inclusive, these days provides transcultural material only for anthropologists. Within India itself, while Kathakali is an art form, *būta* is just a survival, a curiosity. This surely needs to be put right if the performance art of South West India is to be better understood.

India is well able to look after its own cultural heritage. But outsiders seeking to "learn from India" can also have an impact: India's self-regard is often highly reactive to global opinion. We have already remarked on the uneasy coexistence of notions of modernity and cultural heritage. Kannadigas are now also having to cope with political pressures, with questions of identity being bound up with issues of caste, regional independence and religious belief. Cultural "correctness" is being used to divide society in ways quite differently from centuries ago, when the performances and the ceremonies united communities and attracted worshippers from across the religious spectrum. That universality declined under the influence of colonial modernism. Bharatha Iyer notes the disdain and neglect that had encompassed much of the indigenous performance art of Southern India in the early 20th century. The revival came partly from the interest of the educated elite in India, of which Iyer was himself one, and partly from Indian performers who were promoted in the West, often embodying a fusion of styles to make Indian dancing more accessible and acceptable to the particular "castes" of Western society who were to be its champions. That was until the 1960s and 70s when perceptions of Indian culture changed radically, though usually without any greater depth of understanding. Now Indian civilisation represented something wonderfully

[10] K Bharatha Iyer (1955). *Kathakali: the Sacred Dance-Drama of Kerala,* London, Luzac & Company, Author's Preface, x.
[11] Ibid, 13-22
[12] Ibid, 31

“other” was the great attraction. Moreover, the growing export of popular Indian culture was accompanied by the importation and assimilation of Western influences to such an extent that to a certain extent the two became aspects of the each other. That left the less easily absorbed parts of South Indian culture outside the mainstream, in danger of being forgotten, or fossilised as museum pieces. As with quantum physics, the mere existence of the outside observer affects the outcome.

Conclusion: Proposal for New Exhibition in Europe Juxtaposing Būta and Kathakali

It is important to allow people outside India to gain a direct impression of the performance art and ritual of Kerala and Karnataka. We want to organise an exhibition that would focus on Kathakali and *būta* performances, putting audiences at the centre of the spectacle without overloading them with explanations, except for simultaneous translation of the spoken words. It would be as much experiential as educational, attracting a range of people, with personal and academic interests in history, religion, performance, aural and visual art. I would warmly welcome the help and advice from anyone interested in furthering this project.

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