

The Mask-Dances of Kerala

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This is a report on the Workshop and Festival of Masked Dances organized in Kerala by the Natana Kairali, a research and performing centre for traditional arts, from 24th October to 1st November 1992. The author was Director of the Workshop.—Ed.

Forms of dance and drama that breathe life into an inanimate and alien mask, representing a static expression, are as old as human history. Man seems to enjoy greater freedom in self-expression when he hides his face behind a mask.

In the splendid theatre tradition of Kerala we have masks used in religious rituals, classical dances, popular entertainments and dramatic arts. A participant in the performance of a customary ritual uses various devices including a mask in order to attain the necessary state of mind and the appropriate ambience for transformation into the super-human being that he represents. In a religious ritual there is no 'acting', or conscious impersonation. The devotees who gather to witness the performance of it are experiencing a particular divine (or demonic) presence. They stand still with bowed heads and joined palms in an attitude of worship. The mental condition of one who puts on the costumes and make-up prescribed by sacerdotal tradition in Keralite rituals like *Teyyam*, *Tirayattam* or *Padayani* is fundamentally different from that of an actor. On the other hand, some dance forms like *Kummattikali* are meant only to be popular entertainment. They provide ample opportunities even for the uninitiated to perform freely, forgetting their selves and effectively feigning other selves.

Kerala has an abundant variety of art forms evolved through the centuries. The people here have welcomed without inhibition or hesitation all kinds of cultural idioms and religious credos that entered India from outside. The result is wonderful: a mosaic of cultures and associated art forms coexisting in harmony, and assimilation of diverse elements into the everyday life of the common people. Forms which are extinct in other parts of India are still alive in Kerala, despite the dissolution of societal mores and structures by rapid changes. Masks continue to be an integral element in many Keralite rituals and theatre arts.

There are art forms in which the whole face is covered with a mask. But there are also forms in which hardly half of the face is masked and the rest is painted. In some others only the eyes are covered with suitably shaped pieces of silver or bronze. These may also be taken into consideration in a discussion of masks.

In some ritual performances such as *Mudiyettu* there are no masks for the face. Instead, a *mudi* (headgear) representing the head of the deity is used. It is the



Kirata and Hanuman—Wooden masks used for the Kummatti Kali

headgear that represents the dominant mood (*sthayibhava*). The ferocious Bhadrakali of Pootantira is represented solely by the headgear, and nobody pays attention to the face of the performer.

Finely crafted wooden masks are the ones mostly used in Kerala. We have also masks fashioned with less durable materials like arecanut seed coverings (*kamukinpala*), tender coconut fronds (*kuruthola*) and palmyra fronds (*panayola*). Cloth and metal are also occasionally used.

Of all the classical dance-drama forms of Kerala, *Krishnanattam* gives the greatest prominence to masks. (In *Kathakali* too, until recently, masks were in use for some lesser characters.) *Krishnageeti* is a composition in the genre of *geeti kavya* (musical poem) and *Krishnanattam* translates this into visuals. The eventful story of Krishna narrated in the poem has to be presented through a large number of characters. The extensive duration and setting for representing subtle emotions are impossible in the performance-structure. That is why the strange forms and dominant moods of some of the characters are exaggerated and fashioned into

masks. 'Lalita', who allures all by her charms, has to change into a ferocious demoness 'Pootana' in the split of a second. In such a situation masks are of immense utility. In *Krishnanattam* masks are enlivened by dance movements. Rhythmic steps and movements have been choreographed in accordance with the situation. Even the death throes of Pootana are patterned into dance movements.

The masks used in festival dances like *Kummatti*, where gods and demons are presented comically, are caricatures. There are many Indian manuals of physiognomy which classify humanity into types on the basis of determinant characteristics and draw parallels with beasts and birds. It is recorded that a person with tiger's eyes will be as cruel as the Death-God; one with cock's eyes is demonic; one with a face that reminds of a horse will be a victim of poverty and misery. Such descriptions are abundant in treatises such as 'Samudrikalakshana'. These provide excellent guidelines in designing masks as caricatures.

In the week-long Workshop organized by Natana Kairali, there were detailed discussions on the concepts underlying masks, their function in ritual ceremonies and arts, and related topics. Performers as well as scholars participated in the discussions.

"The dancing with masks in Kerala is as old as the tribal culture. Eighteen of the cave-paintings of Edakkal in Wynad, which typify a neolithic culture, show dancers wearing masks." This was stated by Prof. C.R. Rajagopalan.

"In the Euro-American *avant-garde* theatre masks are merely inanimate and monotonic props", said the research scholar Jose George. According to him, "The heterogeneous and stylized masks of the traditional theatre-arts of Kerala fashioned by innumerable artists synthesising their imagination and convictions in the course of centuries cannot be understood by means of the limited connotation that the English word 'mask' carries."

Prof. Sebastian Joseph indicated the basic principle of masks thus: "A face is the mirror of a mind. If it is covered, the actor's individual personality too is covered. This is the fundamental principle of using masks."

Dr Diana Daugherty is of the opinion: "The various and stylized modes of face-painting found in the traditional arts of Kerala may also be included in the category of mask."

Dr Chumar Choondal said: "The face-painting that has become the soul of artistic expression in the traditional arts of Kerala had its origin in the tattooing practised by the aborigines."

Prof. George S. Paul, comparing and contrasting our dance-forms with those still alive in African countries, regretted that the naturalness of our dance-forms is fading out. He said: "Rhythm, dance and music are still inalienable constituents of African life. So in African dance-forms the physical movements still show individual characteristics in the expression of emotions."

Besides these scholars, Kuttappan Achari and Vijayan Achari, two reputed craftsmen, spoke on the making and preserving of masks.

E. Kalidasan, K.M. Unnikrishnan, V.P. Paul, K. Krishnaraj and Nirmala Paniker—artists all of them—explained the masks used in various dance forms



Bhuta in Tirayattam

and theatre acting.

The workshop concluded with a dance festival. There were dances of three different styles, all using masks: *Tirayattam*, which is still popular in some villages of Calicut, *Pootantira* of Palghat, and *Kummattikali* which is invariably a part of the Onam festivities in Trichur.

The ritual art form of *Tirayattam* usually presents the different incarnations of Bhagavati and Siva. When a performer has completed his preparation for representing the god or the goddess, the made-up personality is called *kolam* (form of God). Kayatan, Ghantakaran, Bhairavan, Karivilli, and Karumakan belong to the Saivite group, while Odakalli, Karinkali, Bhadrakali, Bhairavi, Nagakali and Rakesvari are monkeys, horses and the *bhutas* (attendants of Sivan) also appear over and above the main *kolams*.

Rice paste, *chayilyam* (sulphate of mercury), black eye-paste and *manayola* (a paste made of arsenic sulphide), are used for the make-up. Some of the characters like *bhutas* wear wooden masks fully covering their faces. Designs are also painted on the breast of the actors. Each character has its own special pattern of designs.

Tirayattam is performed at night, in the light of torches made of coconut-fronds. The torch-bearers also dance. The main instruments used in the background are *kurumkuzhal* (short-pipe) and *chenda* (drum). This art is performed traditionally by the Peruvannan community.

Pootantira is performed in Palghat and surroundings in connection with the festivals in Devi temples. The man who dances representing Devi wears a wooden headgear on which is carved her ferocious face. Devi is accompanied by a pair of *bhutas*. They wear masks with tongues stuck out. This is performed by the Vannan community. In the background are used archaic instruments like Tudi and Para. This art form is remarkable for a wide variety of acrobatic feats and choreographic patterns.

The dance form *Kummattikali* is a popular entertainment of the Onam season in Trichur and some neighbouring villages. Anyone, without any particular training, can take part in this. All who dance have their faces covered with wooden masks and they have to cover the whole body with *parpatakupullu* (*oldenlandia prioritis*). When this grass is not easily available certain other leaves can be used as substitutes. The aesthetic element in *Kummattikali* comes from the beautiful, artistically carved masks. The chief characters who appear in a *Kummati* performance are Puranic characters; there are also some others taken from real life. In this, gods and demons dance side by side with characters drawn from everyday life, all classes mixing freely and equally. The chief musical instrument used in *Kummattikali* is a bow-shaped stringed instrument called Ona Villu. In the olden times this art used to be performed by the Nair community. But now anyone, interested, of whatever caste or creed, can participate.

Each of these three forms was presented in a setting which is peculiarly its own. A huge fire made of faggots in an open ground, with flames rising about six feet in height, provided lighting for *Tirayattam* and *Pootantira*. As light and shade played hide and seek, the masks exuded their thrilling vitality. It gave a rare opportunity



Mask of Pootan in Pootantira ritual dance



*A mask made of cloth used in
Sangha Kali—Folk theatre*

for the thousands of spectators to get a feel of the fantastic power and charm of masks.

The Workshop marked the beginning of an ambitious venture to classify and study the masks used in the art-forms of Kerala, as well as to disseminate them.