THE RITES OF PASSAGE AND KUTIYATTAM

The Sanskrit Theatre of Kerala

Farley Richmond

Arnold Van Gennep's unique contribution to the field of anthropology is his analysis of the ceremonies which accompany an individual's "life crises", as articulated in his book *Les Rites de Passage*, first published in 1908 and later translated and published in 1960 as *The Rites of Passage*.[1] Van Gennep's work concentrates solely on important events which figure in the various phases of an individual's journey through life-events such as birth, circumcision, initiation, marriage, death, to name but a few of the more important. This theory of rites has been amplified by Victor Turner in the major body of his work[2] with emphasis on the feeling of communities generated by these rites of passage in which large groups of individuals undergo formidable change in their lifestyle, expectations and responsibilities.

Van Gennep recognized three major phases of the rites of passage. These occur in the following order: separation, the rites of cutting the individual off from his former self or place in society, symbolically often thought of as "death"; transition, the rites through which the individual bridges one stage in life with another, sometimes considered the most important part of the process, especially in initiation ceremonies where the individual learns the secrets of the tribe thought to invest him with special powers that are passed down from generation to generation by his forefathers; and finally incorporation or reaggregation which opens the door through which he passes into society as a new member with new status, sometimes interpreted as "birth" or "awakening".

When I first read *The Rites of Passage* I was immediately struck by the similarity of the three-fold process to the phases of most theatre events. The actor separates himself by means of costume and make-up and transforms

A paper prepared for the Xth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences New Delhi, India, December 1978.

himself into the person of the character in order to transmit the content and emotion of the play to the audience and finally merges into society once again, discarding his disguise and resuming his former self. Obviously there are major differences between the rites of passage of an individual and those of a theatre event, but the main patterns are strikingly similar.

The object of this paper then is to take a specific example from the theatre, one with which I am relatively familiar, and to apply the rites of passage theory to it. The theatre form which I have chosen is the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* of Kerala State, South India.[3] *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is one of the oldest forms of theatre in India, tracing its roots to the tenth century A.D. The plays are written in Sanskrit and Prakrit, languages known and understood by only a few priests and scholars who witness the performances. The local language Malayalam is incorporated into the show by the clown character (*Vidūṣaka*) who improvises and expounds on the text at great length. He speaks in a relatively realistic manner in contrast to the other characters who chant their verses and dialogue according to prescribed rules of execution. The actors use a highly complex system of gesture language to interpret the text; however, the meaning of this language too is known to a very few spectators. The eye and facial movements are also highly stylized removing the form further from the understanding of the layman.

Since it is a temple-based art, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performances are arranged on suitable auspicious occasions according to the conjunction of the stars or phases of the moon. Traditionally it takes place in specifically constructed theatre buildings known as *kūttambalam* which are found in about a half dozen Kerala temples. When entering a typical structure, a spectator must duck his head and step over a high threshold. Once inside, the high ceiling, closed-in, unlit room and slightly damp air create the impression of a dark cavern, though low slatted sides provide ample ventilation. In former times the space in front of the stage was reserved exclusively for the Brahmins who were privileged to see plays at close range. A special place was marked out for the king in recognition of his high status and in order to prevent him from polluting the space where the Brahmins sat. Lower caste Hindus were obliged to stand or sit in the aisleways at the side and back of the theatre. I am told, today, in all but one theatre, people of different castes sit wherever they wish; however, I have not yet verified this. Women do usually huddle together at one side of the theatre apart from the men. Special rituals are said to have accompanied every stage of the construction of a *kūttambalam*. An elaborate ritual of consecration concluded the process.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam has all the earmarks of an important ritual event. Buildings have been constructed exclusively for its presentation. The space is ritually consecrated within already sanctified ground. The time of presentation is chosen to coincide with some important religious events in the temple calendar. *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* is called *chakshūṣayāgna* (a visual sacrifice), and like the

sacrifices performed by the temple priests, it is also done in honor of the chief diety.

Rites of Separation

For the actors, the rites of separation commence in the confines of the dressing room, a small room behind the stage. The space is significant, for it may be viewed as a liminal space in this house of worship and liminality. It is neither part of the stage nor part of the auditorium. Separation takes place in that area "betwixt and between", where the actor must make the necessary transformation from the world of reality to the world of the play.

The room is lighted by a simple bell-metal oil lamp about two feet high. The lamp is lighted by the sacred fire brought from the oil lamp which burns in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple before the idol of the chief diety. A small pot of holy water is also brought from the sanctum for use in the preliminary and concluding stage rituals.

The process by which the actor undergoes the rites of separation is as follows: Sitting crosslegged on the floor in front of the oil lamp, he dips his ring finger of his right hand in a little clarified butter (*ghee*) and touches his forehead just between his eyes; then he touches the tip of his nose and his chin. Finally he touches his right cheek and then his left. He takes a strip of red cloth and reverently touches his eyes. After tying the cloth around his forehead, he wipes the oil across his face from right to left. When he has thoroughly oiled his face he places his palms together before his chest and recites some *mantras* honoring the gods and goddesses. At last he proceeds to put on the make-up of the character that he is to portray. It has been said that once these rites are completed, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* should be performed on the same day and should never be postponed. With reference to Vedic rites, Hubert and Mauss observe that,

> From the moment that (the sacrifice) has begun, it must continue to the end without interruption in ritual order. The forces at work, if they are not directed in exactly the way prescribed, elude both sacrifier and priest and turn upon them in a terrible fashion.[4]

The separation rites are charged with symbolic significance. The clarified butter, for example, is considered a pure substance, having been derived from the cow. A Hindu regards the head as the purest part of the body, the seat of reason, thought, intelligence and wisdom. And for the actor, the face is the most important part of his head since the emotional content of the play is conveyed mainly through facial expressions and eye movements. By tying the red cloth around his forehead the actor begins to separate his individual personality and the knowledge of it and to gradually assume the role and character of another being. He must enter the sacred world cautiously,

step by step. This entrance continues with another significant act—that of wiping the oil across the face. Aside from the obvious practical need to provide a base for the make-up, it too signifies the obliteration of the personality of the actor preparing him to take on the character to be portayed. To act, then, is to be in liminality; to pass into a stage outside this world, into a realm apart.

The make-up and costume worn by the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* characters are fanciful and far removed from reality. Their origins have always puzzled scholars who have been unable to trace them to the conventional style of any community or historic period. The actors wear a face make-up, the colours of which are not realistic but symbolic. For example, most heroic characters wear a bright green base make-up. Their eyes and eyebrows are broadly accented with lamp black. Their lips are painted bright red with vermilion powder. A broad white beard of dried rice paste and paper (*chutti*) stretches around the chin from ear to ear. A special seed is placed in the eye prior to the performance to inflame it.

According to tradition, the garments worn by the actors must be washed only by the washermen of a special caste.[5] When seen from the side, the characters appear half-clothed. The audience sees part of the under garment, a large ruffled bustle at the hip; a whitewash of rice water is smoothed over their forearms and legs through which the dark skin of the actors 'bleed" through. No attempt is made to "cover up" and fully costume, no attempt is made to mirror reality. We are clearly in another realm—the realm of symbols. The final item of costume worn by all actors is the headdress.[6] The transformation is now complete and the actor is ready to embark on his journey.

Through the rites of separation, the actors enter a state of in-between. They now inhabit a world apart from the profane, the cognitive, the historic. To clothe the actors in costumes of the known world would be to confine them in time and space. In his liminal state as the character, the audience knows that he is an actor, but not an actor, that he is the character, but not the character. The costumes too fall within this ambiguous framework.

On the first day of the performance, to the right and left of the large oil lamp which stands downstage centre, are eight auspicious objects (*aṣṭha-maṅgalam*) offered as a sacrifice to the presiding diety of the temple to whom the sacrifice is made. Viewed from the audience, to the right of the lamp is a full measure of paddy (unhusked rice) peaked to a mound inside a large wooden container. A stalk of tender coconuts is planted in the centre of the mound. This offering is called *nirapara,* which literally means "full measure of rice". To the left of the lamp is a banana leaf on which is placed rice, an unbroken, unhusked coconut, an uncut areca, at least three beetle leaves, mature plantain fruit, flowers, and brown sugar (jaggary).

While the actors are transforming themselves, the musicians too engage

in rites which separate them from the profane and help them to enter the sacred. The drummer performs rites which sanctify the stage and transforms it into a liminal space. Prior to the performance, he lights a wick from the fire in the dressing room and lights the wicks of the large lamp on the stage. Fire (Agni) is holy and serves as witness to the sacrifices made to the gods. With the rising smoke the oblations reach heaven where they sustain and please the dieties. Thus the transfer of sanctified fire from the purity of the sanctum sanctorum to the dressing room and then to the stage shows the extension of the purity which links all three places to the diety and makes the event of the performance holy.

As the fire burning before the temple diety presides over the sacrifice and illuminates the splendour of the diety so the fire which burns before the actors who play characters from the other world presides over their sacrifice, illuminating it for the spectators. The performance is a reflection of the divine world and as such is a visualization of god's illusion (*māyā*). To have a glimpse (*darśana*) of this world is considered auspicious just as it is for a devotee to have a glimpse of the diety in the sanctum of the temple. The flickering light from the lamp lends a mystery to the characters. Men change into god-like beings and the change is mystical and powerful only as long as the mystery is maintained. To know god is not to *see* him but to recognize him in things.

Liminality

After these separation rites have been concluded and the stage sanctified and ready to receive the epic personages, the musicians play a special pattern of drumming which signals the actor to enter. Attendants hold a red curtain upstage of the lamp as the first actor enters from the upstage door to the right of the audience, which by tradition is always used for entrances. Theoretically, the actor does not make his entrance until the curtain has been removed. So the next preliminary items are designed to arouse suspense in the audience but especially to give the actor an opportunity to complete his incorporation into the spiritual world. Behind the curtain and to the accompaniment of the drums and symbols the actor performs a special pattern of dance and gestures called *marayil kriyā*. The significance of all the symbolic gestures used in this item of ritual are not understood even by the actors, but it must be performed by all actors before they make their first appearance before the spectators. It would seem that since the ritual is done facing the drums, it is designed to show respect for the musical instrument as well as to give the actor a final moment to make his formal transition into character. Once the *marayil kriyā* is completed, the actor splashes holy water on his face three times while reciting a special *mantra*. This act symbolizes bathing and thus has a purifitory function. Again it should be noted that the face is the centre of the ritual observance. Once the actor has assumed his entrance position, five

musical instruments begin to play (*pañchavādya*), the suspense builds and the curtain is swiftly removed revealing the other-worldly being.

From this point on the first day's performance proceeds. What has gone before serves as a kind of bridge linking the reality of everyday life with the other-worldliness of the theatre. Personal rituals and rites mix with public displays of ritual purification.

The *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance may be likened to the liminal stage of an initiation ceremony during which initiates are introduced to the sacred wisdom of their society. In the case of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* the initiates are the spectators and the priests are the actors accompanied by the drummers and musicians who serve as attendants. Cultural knowledge is transmitted by the performance of mythical plays. But unlike initiation ceremonies the initiate in this case does not pass on to a different social stage, rather the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance can be better described as rites of renewal. The audience members come to hear once again the myths of their culture which confirm and strengthen their beliefs and life styles. With repetition and experience the understanding of the myths increase and the inherent and often buried wisdom comes to light. Another major difference between a *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* audience and those who pass through initiation rites is that the social structure has not been cast aside. Brahmins sit with Brahmins, the king with those of his own caste group, and so forth. There is no doffing of formal roles. It would seem then that a feeling of communitas may not exist among the audience members. Not so. Turner advises caution in assuming that communitas can exist only outside of a structural setting.

> It would be unwise, and in fact incorrect, to segregate structure too radically from communitas. I stress this most vigorously for both modes are human. For each level and domain of structure there is a mode of communitas.[7]

And indeed the spectators all have one thing in common which draws them together in a bond—they share the same aural and visual experience of the performance.

Two roles are significant to *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* actors and are of particular interest. That of the stage manager (*Sūtradhāra*) and that of the clown (*Vidūṣaka*). The first role an actor learns is that of the stage manager from Bhasa's Sanskrit play, *Bālacaritam*. Before he may proceed to study other roles, even before he is permitted to study *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* seriously, he must first master this part. During his ritual initiation, a student stands behind his teacher who is performing the role and imitates him from beginning to end. His first public performance (*araṅṅettam*) is that of the stage manager's role which serves as a public initiation into the art of acting. This is considered the first major step in his career.

What is it that makes this particular role so important? The stage manager is usually the first person to appear on the stage in a good many Sanskrit plays. Therefore, since he is first, it is logical that the student should learn how to perform at least one such role at the outset of his career. However, this is not the only possible explanation. The function of a stage manager is to serve as a bridge, an intermediary between the world of reality and the world of the play. He is given the job of greeting the spectators, often of announcing the name of the author and title of the play and introducing its theme. His role abruptly concludes when the first character enters. Thus, in the Sanskrit theatre in ancient times, the stage manager was an important link in the transition from ritual to fantasy. He is neither actor nor is he character and yet he is both. His ambiguity permits him certain license. He participates in the rituals which preceed the first act and he speaks directly to the spectators; only one other character is permitted the privilege of speaking to the audience —the *Vidūṣaka.* So from a ritual point of view it seems right and proper that an actor who engages in an occupation in the liminal realm should portray as his first task the role of an ambiguous figure, the stage manager.

The other role of major significance is that of the clown (*Vidūṣhaka*). In many Sanskrit plays he is depicted as a misshapen creature. The ancient texts of dramaturgy describe him as a hungry Brahmin, friend and companion to the chief character, having a hump back, protruding teeth and a bald head with a long strand of hair. He carries a crooked stick and walks with a limp. His function is usually peripheral to the main action and introduces an element of comic relief. However, the *Kūtiyāṭṭam* actors have taken this figure and expanded his role to that of a central character in the dramas in which he appears. They have done so at the expense of the text but to the sheer delight of the audience. The chief reason he has gained prominence in Kerala is the fact that he is the principal character in the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance who is permitted to communicate extensively in Malayalam, the local language. According to tradition, he must recite in Sanskrit, repeat the words of his hero companion in Prakrit and enlarge upon their meaning in Malayalam. Armed with the tool of direct communication with the audience, the actor has been invested with unusual power. It is said he may criticize members of the audience, as well as society as a whole, with impunity. Legends abound in Kerala in which irate spectators take issue with his jabbing remarks, only to have the clown remove his headdress and bring the performance to an abrupt halt, polluting the entire temple. So powerful is his license that even kings have restrained themselves from taking offense at his remarks. One of the highpoints of a *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance is his satire on the aims of Hindu life. In four successive evenings he holds forth entirely alone upon the stage often improvising for six hours at a stretch, wittily chastising society and prominent individuals with his barbed invectives. Because of his freedom to criticize all members of society regardless of their social rank and caste the audience experiences a unique sense of communitas. In this the clown serves as a leveler of society. It is no wonder then that only the eldest and most

respected members of the actor community are permitted to play the clown. A quick wit, excellent grasp of Sanskrit literature, Hindu philosophy and religious practices and perception of the weaknesses and foibles of mankind are necessary accomplishments before an actor dares assume the role. Once again we have an in-between figure who mediates between the world of the play and the world of reality, given the utmost license to criticize and given the power to pollute absolutely if it is challenged.

Who are these actor-priests of the temple theatres who are permitted to criticize even the kings and the highest caste members, the Nambudiri Brahmins? Who are these who diligently pursue the hereditary rights of their forefathers to act a dying form of theatre? They too are "threshold men". They too are men in the middle.

Fragments of history and tradition blend imperceptibly to paint an incomplete picture of these unusual people. According to one tradition, they are linked to the ancient line of court bards who once drove the battle chariots of kings. The story goes that when the Perumals, the first rulers of Kerala, settled in the state, they brought with them a family of actors who were *sūtas* by caste. The actor family was childless and so to carry on their line they implored the king to allow them to adopt children who were illegitimate, born of the union of a Brahmin woman and a non-Brahmin man. The king agreed and a line of actors came into being called *Cākyārs.*[8]

The earliest reference to the *Cākyārs* occurs in the *Silappadikaram,* a Tamil epic of the second century A.D. in which an actor from Kerala is mentioned. By 900 A.D. the *Cākyārs* were engaging in the ritual observances in the Kerala temples. It is said that there have never been more than eighteen *Cākyārs* families. Today on y six survive, approximately thirteen people in all who have the skill to perform *Kūtiyāṭṭam.* There is no detailed and scholarly study done of this unusual and now rapidly declining caste. We do know however that the *Cākyārs* are a marginal people — the mother being of one caste and the father of another. Gundert, whose famous dictionary is still the accepted standard of the derivation and definition of Malayalam words, described the *Cākyārs* as "half Brahmins". It seems appropriate that these marginal men should have the license to engage in an occupation of liminality. It seems appropriate too that the initiation into this occupation should be by the performance of the liminal role of the stage manager. And finally, it seems appropriate that the role that indicates his greatest achievement as an actor should be the role of the powerful and liminal figure of the *Vidūṣaka.*

Reincorporation

At the conclusion of a performance, a special ceremony of reincorporation is performed. Let me describe the rites enacted at the conclusion of Act

II of *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*, titled *"Śūrpaṇakhāṅkam"*. Rāma and his brother Laksmana complete a special pattern of dance-like movements and retire to the dressing room. The actor playing Rāma removes his headdress, all but the strip of red cloth that binds his forehead, and returns to the stage from the entrance door. In his hand he carries a pot of sacred water. He sits before the oil lamp and washes his legs and feet. He then performs a special ritual called *achumanam* which signifies taking a bath (literally, "a dip") to purify himself. I am told this ritual is performed by Hindus during their morning oblations. The actor pours water into his right palm and sips twice. With his right hand he symbolically spreads the water across his face twice from right to left, then he spreads it once from forehead to chin. With his thumb to his ring finger he touches his eyes, first the right then the left. Then he touches right and left nostrils with his thumb and forefinger joined. With his thumb pressed aginst the tip of his little finger he touches his right and left earlobes. Finally, he joins his thumb with his first three fingers, the little finger remains extended, he touches the center of his chest and turns his palm up as he touches the top of his head.

The whole process is repeated from the point where he sips the holy water twice. Finally, he stands up and with two sticks, which an attendant has placed at the base of the lamp, he takes the two wicks facing the stage lamp and makes a clockwise vertical motion three times (*arathi*, literally "the blessing of the fire"). The lighted wicks are placed at the base of the lamp and the actor prostrates himself facedown on the floor in the direction of the temple diety with his hands folded above his head. At this point the drummers play a special rhythmic pattern to conclude the performance and the actors and musicians retire to the dressing room.

The rites of incorporation bear some resemblance to the rites of separation. The actor makes a final appearance on the stage without his headdress revealing the red cloth that he had first tied about his forehead. Therefore, he has not quite made his exit from the world of the character, neither has he quite entered the world of the profane. The washing of his legs and feet actually does wash away the whitewash he wore on his legs when he was putting on his costume in the rites of separation. The most important rite seems to be that of washing away the oil from his face. In returning to his real self he spreads water from right to left duplicating the purifying process of bathing and using it to symbolize his return to normalcy. Upon his return to the temporal world, the stage, the space of liminality, must also be transformed to its original state. This he does through the extinction of the wicks of the lamp and finally he salutes the temple diety with a full prostration on the floor, not as the character but as the actor returned from the world of the play. The actors, even when they have returned to the profane world, must retain something of what they acquired during the course of the sacrifice and the practices of exit are reduced to their simplest form.[9] Thus the rites of exit and reaggregation are performed by only one actor on behalf of all.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Van Gennep's theory of the rites of passage and Turner's approach to communitas offer a framework into which disparate and seemingly unrelated theatre events take on new and highly charged significance. The simple act of applying makeup, for example, has a symbolic meaning far more important than its immediate practical value. Within the tripartite division of ritual events it becomes a crucial step in the transition of an actor into the liminal world. For many years, the theatre has needed a framework which would bring order and meaning to it, one which is not confined by cultural and historical constraints. Van Gennep and Turner may have provided that framework.

NOTES

1. Trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
2. Principally, this paper relies on *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors.* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1974).
3. Although I have relied on my own field notes for much of the information, I am also indebted to the work of several scholars. The following sources were particularly useful: K. Kunjunni Raja, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam: An Introduction.* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1964) and "Sanskrit Drama on the Stage", *Journal of the Madras University*, 47, 2 (July 1975), pp. 1-31.; Clifford R. Jones, "The Temple Theatre of Kerala: Its History and Description." Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1967) and "Source Materials for the Construction of the Nāṭyamaṇḍapa in the *Śilparatna* and the Tantrasamuchchaya Śilpabhāgam," *Journal of the American Oriental Society.* (July-September 1973). And P. Krishnan Nambudiripad, "Kūṭiyāṭṭam," Master of Literature Thesis (Madras University, n.d.). Invaluable data and observations have generously been provided by Mr. L.S. Rajagopalan of Trichur whose writings on Kūṭiyāṭṭam music ("The Mizhavu,") and "Music in Kootiyattam," *Sangeet Natak*, 10 (October-December 1968, pp. 12-25) are highly regarded.
4. *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function.* Trans. by W.D. Halls. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 28.
5. In some parts of Kerala the washermen are known as Vannan, in other parts they are called Mannan. An ordinary Washerman (Veluttetan) will not do. My source for this information is Nambudiripad, p. 3, f.n.
6. In Kathakali, the popular dance-drama of Kerala, a close relative of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the actor chants special prayers over the headdress after sprinkling it with water; when he wears it he is thought to "become" the character he portrays. In Yakshagāna, a form of theatre popular in the coastal region of Mysore State, the crowns are assigned a special place of honor in the dressing room. Pictures of the dieties, incense, an oil lamp and sometimes a pūjā of fruits and flowers sanctify the headdress and invest them with special power. In many parts of India masks are said to possess sacred power and so they must be handled with care. For details see my article, "Some Religious Aspects of Indian Traditional Theatre," *The Drama Review*, XV, 3 (Spring 1971), pp. 122-131.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 253-254.
8. N.P. Unni. *Sanskrit Dramas of Kulasekhara.* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1977), p. 178, f.n.
9. Hubert and Mauss.

DR. FARLEY RICHMOND, well-known Asian Theatre Scholar; Drama Dept., Michigan University, USA.