

Amalgamation of the East and the West: A Study of Chavittu Nadakam

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Abstract

The Western colonial history of Kerala started in May 1498 when Vasco de Gama landed on the shores of Kappad, Kozhikode. The Portuguese aim of establishing a rule in India with their centre in Kerala was made possible because of their monopoly over Indian Ocean. Besides political interests, they had vested interests to accumulate wealth and power by establishing new markets for their products and acquire raw materials and products useful to them. The discord among the native rulers served these interests and they succeeded in establishing power in Kerala and they continued their governance for 150 years till they were defeated by the Dutch. The Portuguese from the very beginning were intolerant to other cultures and religions. They started converting Muslims and Hindus to Christians. The Portuguese rulers promoted marriage between Indians and Portuguese. Forceful conversion to Christianity was done in Goa and other places. These group of new Christians were called Latin Catholics. Since the Christians of Kerala coexisted with Hindus, temple art forms and martial arts influenced them largely. Understanding the affinity of new Christians to the existing local art form, the Portuguese devised a typical Christian art form Chavittu Nadakam to prevent the new Christians from watching the temple arts. Chavittu Nadakam, thus is a form of dance drama that developed by the Latin catholic community in the 17th century as a result of the encounter between the Eastern and western visual art forms .. The cultural interface between Kerala and Portuguese had marked the uniqueness of Chavittu Nadakam. The paper attempts to analyze how the art form Chavittu Nadakam reflects the history of evolution and the internal structure of the Latin Catholic community in Kerala.

Key words: Chavittu Nadakam, Kalaripayattu, mamankam, Crusades

Chavittu Nadakam is a visual art form believed to have originated in Kochi among the Latin Catholics of Kerala during the 17th century (Rafi 1974,89). It became prevalent among the Latin Christian community in the districts of Alappuzha and Kochi. Chavittu nadakam is a fusion art developed out of Eastern and Western art forms-Indian Classical arts and Western Opera. Sabina Rafi's *Chavittu Nadakam : Oru Charitra Padanam* is the first historical treatise on Chavittu Nadakam(1964) traces the historical background of the operatic dance form which had its origin in Ernakulam and compares it with other Indian and European art forms. The present study analyses how the art form Chavittu Nadakam traces the history of evolution and the internal structure of the Latin Catholic community in Kerala.

Art forms of Kerala – 16th and 17th Centuries

Kalaripayattu is one of the most ancient forms of martial art prevalent in South India. The earliest documented evidence of Kalaripayattu is in the form of palm leaf manuscripts with drawings found in Kerala in 200BCE.. Discussion on Kalaripayattu starts with the story of Bodhidharma who hailed from Kanjipuram in Tamil Nadu where he was born a prince, the third son of the ruling king, Pallava. Bodhidharma is believed to be Buddhist monk, trained in Kalari, who had travelled to China, established Shaolin Temple in 527 AD. The hypothesis is that Chinese Kung fu is evolved from the South Indian Kalaripayattu. The medieval period in Kerala is

marked by the reign of Chera dynasty. The Cheras were always in conflict with the neighboring Cholas rulers over the expansion of their kingdoms. This resulted in exhausting war between the Chola and Chera rulers. Later the great Cheraman Perumal converted to Islam and decided to set off on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Before leaving, he divided his Kingdom into three: The Northern Malabar, The Southern Travancore and the City of Kochi. Malabar was ruled by Kolathiri, Travancore by Venad and the Kochi to Perimpattappa. The fourth Piece of land, Kozhikode was given to Samutiri along with his titular sword and conch and asked him to expand his kingdom with his might. The local kings started fighting each other.

At this point of history caste system was prevalent in Kerala. Brahmins and Cattar brahmins were engaged in martial arts. Nairs practiced the northern tradition of kalaripattu. The chieftens of Kerala were nairs and the Nair class had the right to carry arms. Apart from nairs, certain subcastes like Ezhavas, muslims and Christians had also the right to bear arms. Kalaris were established in different parts of Kerala to train the warriors. The festival of mamankam was organized every twelve years by the King of Valluvanad at Thirunavayya on the banks of Bharatapuzha. Later Zamorin conquered Valluvanad, killed the King and took over the right to conduct mamankam. On the day of the festival, Samutiri sits on a throne surrounded by body guards. Chavers, the warriors of the defeated Valluvanad king is challenged to avenge the death of their king and kill Samutiri who is surrounded by bodyguards. Many young chekavars who were trained in kalaris for twelve successive years lost their lives in the attempt. This practice continued for years till the British government put an end to it in 1766. The period of ankam¹ and chekavars² is deeply ingrained in the history of Kalarippayattu. Ankam or duel, existed in Kadathanad since the 14th century, was one of the ways to settle disputes. Income from ankam was a major source of revenue for the royal treasury.

According to the powers given by the Zamorin, the right to conduct ankam belongs to the Naduvazhi⁴. The chekavars could enter the angathattu (a raised wooden platform) only in the presence of Naduvazhi. The heroic tales of the Chekavars were inscribed in the historical pages of Kalarippayattu in Kerala in golden letters.

Kathakali was another important art form that originated around the 17th century and had its roots in Krishnanattam during the time of Samoothiri. Kathakali is a temple art form that synthesizes music, dance, facial movements and choreography. It has incorporated elements of Kalarippayattu into its domain- its movements. The traditional themes of Kathakali are folk tales, religious legends and spiritual concepts from the Hindu epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Historical background

The Western colonial history of Kerala started in May 1498 when Vasco de Gama landed on the shores of Kappad, Kozhikode. The Portuguese aim of establishing a rule in India with their centre in Kerala was made possible as they gained their monopoly over the sea routes in Indian Ocean. The Samoothiri Maharaja of Kozhikode was the hereditary monarch of Kozhikode on the South Malabar region of India. Kozhikode was one of the important trading ports of India. During the 15th century the Portuguese who arrived on the port approached Samoothiri for carrying out trade. He permitted the Portuguese to trade in Kozhikode. They had vested interests to accumulate wealth and power by establishing new markets for their products and acquire raw materials and products useful to them. The discord among the native rulers served these interests and they succeeded in establishing power in Kerala.

¹ Ankam is a Malayalam word for combat or battle. In medieval Kerala, ankam served as a way to settle disputes between districts and nobles

² chekavars were a martial caste in of Kerala. Chekavar is derived from the Sanskrit words Sevakar, Sevakan or Sevaka, meaning soldiers in service or soldiers in royal service

³ The Samoothiri (Anglicised as Zamorin) was the hereditary monarch of the kingdom of Kozhikode on the South Malabar

⁴ Naduvazhi refers to landlords, chieftains or descendants of royal households in the regions what are now mostly parts of Kerala, India.

They established a factory and fort in Samoothiri's jurisdiction, attacked Arab properties and started confiscating their lands. This provoked the Samoothiri and finally led to conflict. In this conflict, the vassals to Samoothiri took sides. The ruler of the Kingdom of Tanur, supported the Portuguese and Tanur (Vettathunadu) became one of the earliest Portuguese Colonies in India. The ruler of Kochi also stood against the Samoothiri so the Portuguese took advantage of the rivalry between the Samoothiri and Rajah of Kochi. Francisco de Almeida, the appointed Viceroy of Portuguese India in 1505, established his headquarters at Kochi. During his reign, the Portuguese managed to take over relations with Kochi and built a number of fortresses along the Malabar Coast. The Portuguese settled in different parts of Southern India and started practicing the western ways.

Spread of Christianity

From the very beginning, the Portuguese were intolerant to other cultures and religions. They started converting Muslims and Hindus to Christians. The Portuguese rulers promoted marriage between Indians and Portuguese. Forceful conversion to Christianity was done in Goa and other places. These group of new converted Christians were called Latin Catholics. Since the new Christians had cultural roots in Kerala, they were highly influenced by the existing traditional folk and classical art forms of their land. largely. Understanding the affinity of new Christians to the existing local art form, the Portuguese

devised a typical Christian art form Chavittu Nadakam to prevent them from watching the so-called Hindu arts. (Thomas 159-60) Chavittu Nadakam thus is a form of dance drama that developed by the Latin catholic community in the 17th century as a result of the encounter between the Eastern and western visual art forms.

Origin of Chavittu Nadakam- Inferences

There are different assumptions related to the origin of Chavittu Nadakam .

- The advent of Portuguese rule gave rise to the art form Chavittu Nadakam
- This art form became popular in the Portuguese colonial premises
- It had the cultural elements of Kerala art forms like kathakali and kalarippayattu
- Chavittu Nadakam depicts the heroic life of European saints and heroes
- It plays a role in spreading religion (K M George 61)

Any art form reflects the culture of its origin. Similarly, the Tamil- Sanskrit interconnection prevalent in Kerala is replicated in this art form. Apart from the local culture it bears the semiotics of the colonial culture too. Like the Ranga pooja ⁵in classical art forms, Chavittu Nadakam commences with a prayer, an invocation.

There are different stories regarding the origin of Chavittu Nadakam. During the 17th century, on Sundays, Christians gathered around the Coonan Cross and sang songs and Bhajans⁷. It is said that some sang kadhakali padams⁸ too. Chinnathambipilla, a Catholic Tamil philosopher poet who resided in Mattanchery decided to bring about a change in this

⁵ Rites observed before the performance in classical arts according to *Natya Shastra*

⁶ The leaning cross in Mattanchery in Kerala where the Syrian Christians took an oath that they would not submit to Jesuits or Latin Catholic hierarchy

⁷ Hindu devotional songs

⁸ Kathakali literature, the songs sung during the performance of Kathakali

practice. After discussing the issue with two priests, he wrote a play “Brazeena” based on the life of saint Brazeena and it was performed by his disciples. It became successful, many were attracted to this art form (Vasanthan 160-61)

This theory becomes convincing in the context of fundamentalist attitude of the Portuguese who couldn't conceive the idea of this new Christians becoming a part of local art forms. Kathakali and Bhajans were then considered as the symbols of Hinduism. Understanding the situation, the Portuguese tried to devise an art that could redefine the identity of new Christians. In this context the art form developed by Chinaathambipilla served the purpose. With the popularity of Chavittu Nadakam, the ethnic art forms became nonsensical and the new art form emerged as modern.

Eastern Kalaripayattu, Kathakali and Western Opera

Chavittu Nadakam used the disciplining techniques of the martial art form Kalaripayattu that was prominent in the Samoothiri period. Learning Chavittu Nadakam begins with the training in martial arts. The training starts under the guidance of Annavi, the teacher like that of in kalari where the practice begins under the guidance of gurukkal. (Francis 161) It begins with Chuvadu, the footwork as in kalaripayattu. The name ‘Chavittu Nadakam’ means stamping drama where the rhythmic and subtle stamps of the actors play a pivotal role. The stage, like ankathattu in ankam is made of wooden planks and the musical beats of the footwork is crucial to the performance. The beat of the stamps synchronizes with the song or music with a blend of costumes mark the aesthetic effect of the performance. Only those who gain mastery in martial arts, would be selected for

⁹ Teacher who teaches chavittu natakam

¹⁰ Teaches Kalari

¹¹ Stage where ankam is fought

Chavittu Nadakam. The performer should have perfect long legs to depict important heroes on the stage. Kalari training was mandatory for every artist in order to depict war, hunting, etc. on the stage. This points to the historical fact that during the end of the fifteenth century when Portuguese came to India, there were Kalaris on every coast.

The male members of every local Christian family between the age of 8 and 25 went to these Kalaris and mastered kalaripayattu and military training (Sabeena 1980, 197). The local art forms during those period had war narratives and it is natural that it got into Chavittu Nadakam too. Like any other local art forms, there was a great impotence for disciplining the body through proper training to perform the characters on the stage.

Another influence on Chavittu Nadakam was Kathakali. During the 17th and 18th centuries the Christians of Kerala tried to present the Bible stories through Kathakali and this culminated into Chavittunadakam (Sreedharamenon 578) Like Kathakali, chavittunadakam also gives prominence to music and dance. Both use nilavilakku on the stage and the musical instruments ilathalam and drum were used in the performance of both art forms. The colorful costumes used in Chavittu Nadakam are akin to the Kathakali where the characters are identified by the costumes they wear. As Kathakali depicts the history of Aryan invasion Chavittu Nadakam carries the symbols of Portuguese invasion. Both are devised to spread religions

across lands. (Sabeena 37)

Chummar observes that Chavittu Nadakam has certain elements of Portuguese opera. Depicting the lives of Western religious heroes, the Portuguese aimed at spreading their religion too. Opera is a musical dance drama. In both opera and Chavittu Nadakam the actor sings songs. Like in the Western operas, Chavittu Nadakam also depicts the heroic

¹² Place where kalaripayattu is learned under the guidance of gurukkal

life of Roman heroes and warriors of Crusades. Sabina Rafi observes that Chavittu Nadakam is the only art form in Kerala that has intertwined the elements of Western opera and local art forms of kathakali and kalaripayattu (126) It is regional in the sense that it uses a combination of Tamil and Sanskrit aesthetics. This art form became a reflection of the cultural hybridity that existed during the 16th and seventeenth centuries.

Chavittu Nadakam- Constructing Identity

Portuguese used art to spread their Christian ideology. By promoting Chavittu Nadakam, they tried to recreate the identity of new Christians. They found it impossible to erase the ethnic roots from the new Christians who were once a part of the ethnic culture. So they devised a new art form to create a new cultural identity. Construction of identity is influenced by historical cultural factors. Imbibing from the ethnic culture the Portuguese created a new Christian self with an aim to prevent them from mixing with other religions. This construct of a Christian self, different from other existing communities restructured the consciousness of the entire society. They aimed at constructing a separate identity for Christians so as to isolate them from other communities. The identity construct had left a deep impression on the consciousness of the society.

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