

SELTMANN, FRIEDRICH. *Schattenspiel in Kerala. Sakrales Theater in Süd-Indien* [The Shadow-Play of Kerala. Sacred theater in South India]. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, 1986. 134 pages. English summary and appendix: sequence of scenes of the Kamba-Rāmāyaṇak-Kūttu. Bibliography, indices, 149 black and white and 16 color photographs. Hardcover DM 148.—; ISBN 3-515-04233-4. (In German)

Friedrich Seltmann's latest contribution to the literature of Indian puppetry is the result of field researches conducted in Kerala for various periods between 1962 and 1982. Prof. Seltmann gave us the benefit of his earlier Kerala studies in articles published in 1971 and 1982. The current publication encompasses these writings and extends them to produce a definitive ethnographic treatise on Kerala shadow puppetry. Seltmann notes the widespread decline of shadow puppetry in India. State subsidies keep some troupes operating but even then they must make concessions to the prevailing influence of the cinema. In Kerala, however, there is a chance shadow puppetry may survive in something like its traditional form. If this comes about the puppet theatre will join other forms which Kerala has preserved long after they vanished from the rest of India, notably the classic Sanskrit drama, Kutiyattam.

It is often said that the Kerala shadow theatre is not genuinely a Kerala form but is just a variant of the Tamil shadow puppetry. The center of Kerala puppetry is the Palghat district bordering the Ghats and Tamil Nadu beyond. Seltmann's expertise in the various traditions of Indian puppetry allows him to demonstrate that the Palghat puppets are most similar to the perforated leather figures of the shadow theatre in Orissa (and Thailand) and are not the same as the colored translucent figures employed from Goa to Karnataka and in Maharashtra, or the "mixed style" figures of south Tamil Nadu. There are some connections with Tamil puppetry, but even more distinctive features.

The shadow theatres originated in north and central India and were exhibited in the countryside by itinerant troupes. Perhaps this explains why these performances escaped the notice of specialists until recently. As early as 1627, however, the Italian traveler Pietro della Valle had witnessed a shadow puppet performance in a temple in south Karnataka. Today only the puppet theatres of Kerala (and of South Maharashtra, to which Seltmann devoted a previous book) are almost exclusively connected with religious rituals and seldom given for entertainment alone.

The Kerala performers whom Seltmann interviewed claimed to be descendants of members of a Pulavar caste of south Tamil Nadu who arrived in Palghat no later than one hundred and fifty years ago, offering personal genealogies in support of this history. The construction of the figures, the technique of performance and the texts have all been passed down in the male line. The present day performers have difficulty finding relatives willing to accept the transmission. Some of the figures and procedures are incomprehensible even to the current generation of puppeteers. Rather than concentrate on the performers' attempts to serve a fading vocation, Seltmann devotes the bulk of this excellently produced book to the conditions and procedures of performance.

A good deal of space is devoted to the construction and design of the figures themselves and here again Seltmann mingles technical information with an almost melancholy account of the changes in the puppetry craft. The deer skin formerly used for the puppets is no longer affordable, forcing the puppet makers to rely on coarser skins.

The vegetable and mineral pigments used to give the figures their "classic" color have given way to garish oil paints thickly applied in imitation of movie posters. The versatility of arm movement of which certain figures were once capable is now limited because the figures are no longer so well made and the manipulators are no longer so skilled. Seltmann's extensive photographic catalogue of the figure types (gods, demons, figures, animals, etc.) both in static space and in performance gives clear imagery of this theatre's contours.

There is a brief section on the architecture of the *kuttumadam*, the small building adjunct to temples where the shadow theatre is performed, and on the musical ensemble that accompanies the dramas. The heart of the book is a schematic outline of a typical performance including all the ritual sequences and protocols which surround the actual manipulation of the puppets. The plays are usually performed between February and April ("the peacock season" between monsoons in Kerala) on the occasion of annual festivals in temples dedicated to the goddesses Bhagavati and Bhadrakali over periods ranging from seven to twenty-one days. Depending upon the length of the performance sequence one or all six books of the Rāmāyaṇa may be dramatized. The texts, set down in inherited prompt-books, are in a form of Tamil. Seltmann provides an English only scene summary (but not spoken text) of one sequence. The drama is, however, second to the larger ritual context. Seltmann's field experience and scholarly vision lead him to stress the ceremonial whole of the shadow theatre. He appends an important chapter on the relations between the shadow theatre and the Bhagavati cult, including a discussion of the myth that justifies the connection between cult and puppetry.

This book is a model of successful scholarship. It critically presents a mass of new information on a previously obscure subject, demonstrates the importance of the subject to a larger set of concerns (shadow theatre in India, in south Asia as a whole, the role of performance in Hindu worship, among others) all with a fine sense of proportion. Kerala shadow theatre is a unique shadow theatre because of its religious context. True to his lifelong scholarly purpose Seltmann leaves his material open to further interpretation. Students of Hindu and of Indian folk cosmology will find much here, as will specialists in the effects of broad culture change upon local arts. Most promising of all is the prospect of further field study opened by this seminal publication.

Richard M. Swiderski
Holliston, Massachusetts

SEN, SOUMEN, editor. *Folklore in North-East India*. New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1985. Xvi+233 pages. Hardcover Rs. 125/- (Distributed by Western Book Depot, Pan Bazar, Gauhati (Assam), India).

This volume begins with a commendable introduction treating various aspects of the study of folklore to the great benefit of the students and the investigators in the field. There are four articles dealing with folklore items of Arunāchal Pradesh. The first one is a critical study of the basic patterns in myth-making amongst the tribes of Arunāchal—wherein a sound attempt to correlate the tribal myths with those in the Vedic texts has been made. The second paper relates to folk stories associated with the origin and migration of the people of Tirap district of Arunāchal. This is followed by a study of folksongs of Arunāchal with summaries of some songs in English only. The fourth one is a study of the Kebang folktale of the Gallong, one of the tribes of