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KaaLiyaaTTam
**The Life History of a Performer and
the Development of a Performing Art**

Abstract

KaaLiyaaTTam is a ritual dance performed in the guise of KaaLi, a popular female deity worshiped in Tamil Nadu and in other parts of India. The aim of this article is to explore the relationship between the performing art *KaaLiyaaTTam* and the life history of a person performing it to find if the relationship influences the performing art, and if so, how. On the basis of data collected through participant observation in many areas of Tamil Nadu and interviews with performers, the author shows that *KaaLiyaaTTam* is closely related to the life of the performer. He also argues that the benefits of the performance for performers is not economic but psychological. The author concludes that there is a mutually influential relationship between the performance of *KaaLiyaaTTam* and its performer.

Keywords: *KaaLiyaaTTam*—ritual dance—Tamil Nadu—KaaLi—life history—performer

IN TAMIL NADU, (South India) many of the performing arts, which form part and parcel of the rituals of the people, have gradually begun to be transformed into professional arts. One can identify several sociological reasons for such a transformation. Among them, the relationship between the art and the life history of the performer is very significant. To probe deeper into this relationship I propose two specific questions: (1) Is there any direct relationship between the performing art and the life history of the performer? (2) If so, how can this relationship influence the performing art?

The aim of this article is to answer these questions. To achieve this aim, I first present the life history of Mr. Ramakrishnan, a 46 year old school teacher who has been performing *KaaLiyaaTTam* (i.e., KaaLi dance) in Palayamkottai in Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu for the past twenty years. *KaaLiyaaTTam* is a ritual dance performed by a man (never a woman) in the guise of KaaLi, a popular female deity worshiped in Tamil Nadu and in many parts of India. The findings of this study on the relationship between the life history of Ramakrishnan and *KaaLiyaaTTam* are compared with those found in the context of performances in Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli districts.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Performer, audience, text, and context are the main factors in any performing art. Some scholars have analyzed the way in which a text is performed and the manner in which the performance affects the text. For example, BLACKBURN (1988, xviii) introduces a “text-centered approach” and analyzes how “bow-songs” structure their own singing. M. RAMASAMY (1989) analyzes the style of performance of a particular *terukkuuttu* troupe.¹ The present study differs from these in that it analyzes the development of a performing art—namely, *KaaLiyaaTTam*—in the light of the life history of a performer.

KaaLiyaaTTam IN TAMIL NADU

The *KaaLiyaaTTam* ritual dance is performed as a performing art by men in the guise of KaaLi all over Tamil Nadu. It is referred to by different names

in different places: *KaaLiveesam*, *KaaLiyaaTTam*, *KaaLi tirunaTanam* and *KaaLi viitiulaa*. Similarly, there are differences from place to place in performance context, purpose and style of performance, choice of musical instruments, and in the way make-up is applied,

In the northern districts of Tamil Nadu (e.g., South Arcot, North Arcot, Salem, Tiruchirappalli, and Thanjavur) the text of *Mahaabaaratam* is performed as *terukkuuttu* during the festival of Draupatiamman. One of the episodes in this performance is the enactment of Aravaan being killed as a sacrificial offering to KaaLi. Before this episode begins, a person in the guise of KaaLi goes dancing around the village.² During this time, if anyone comes near him, he violently chases the person away. Normally, he is tied by a rope and two persons walk behind him, each holding an end of the rope. Preceding him, performances of martial arts such as *ḱatticcantai* (sword fighting), and *cilampaaTTam* (stick fighting) take place. Women possessed by evil spirits bow before the *KaaLiyaaTTam* performer, who in turn beats the women with a broom and winnowing fan in order to exercise the evil spirit—a ritual act that is believed to result in the removal of the evil spirit.

This KaaLi dance is performed with other festival events in Thanjavur at temples dedicated to the following deities: PaccaikkaaLi, PavaLakkaaLi, SriMaturakaaLi, SuntaramaakaaLi and VaTapatrakaaLi. In Thanjavur District it is performed in Kumbakonam, Aduthurai, Thirupuvanam, Thirumangalakudi, Thiruvidadaimaruthur, Sathanur, Ammasathram, and Thepperumanallur. In Tiruchirappalli District it is done in Keelapazhur, Kodalikaruppur, Udayarpalayam, and Jeyankondam. In these places a ritual performance called *KaaLi viiti ulaa* is done by a *KaaLiyaaTTam* performer who represents KaaLi by donning a mask and artificial hands made of well-finished fig wood and beautifully painted with different colors (see figure 3). The *KaaLi viiti ulaa*, consists mainly of a procession of KaaLi in the streets, accompanied by the rhythmic music of *naiyaanTi meeLam* that is played with an orchestra of folk percussion instruments like *tavil*, *urumi*, and *pambai*, along with the wind instrument *naayanam*. During the procession people worship the performer as if he truly were KaaLi.

The rituals in temples dedicated to PaccaikkaaLi and PavaLakkaaLi take place every year between May and June in Thanjavur. While PavaLakkaaLi symbolizes anger, PaccaikkaaLi symbolizes fertility. During the festival, which is based on the local myth, two men dance in the streets in the guise of PaccaikkaaLi and PavaLakkaaLi.

This dance is performed during KaaLi temple festivals in Tirunelveli, Palayamkottai, and Kulasekarappattinam. In such places, people worship KaaLi because they desire a specific benefit. When such a benefit is granted, they worship in the guise of KaaLi (*KaaLiveesam*). It is for the same reason

people wear the masks of god Siva, Muruga, Anumaan, and KaaLi. Those who wear the masks of KaaLi enter a procession by dancing to the music of *maḷuTam*—a percussion drum used for temple festivals by only Kaniyaans, a minority, technologically-unsophisticated caste group living in South Tamil Nadu.

There are three or four professional *KaaLiyaaTTam* performers in Thiruvarur and Nagapattinam. They all dance excellently to the music of *naiyaanTi meeLam* and are chosen to dance during festivals at KaaLi temples. In preparation for the dance, performers are responsible for arranging the appropriate make-up to represent a specific deity and for preparing costume articles that are not too heavy.

DATA COLLECTION

If the questions raised in the beginning of this article are to be answered, the researcher must learn the performer's life history by being near him for many days. It is also important to watch an entire performance and continue to observe similar performances in different places at different times. Though opportunities to collect data were few, I was able to get the necessary primary data through fieldwork. The fieldwork undertaken for this research can be divided into two periods.

The first period was done during the International Workshop on Folkloristics organized by St. Xavier's College in Palayamkottai. The workshop took place in three places between June and December 1990: Kodaikanal (18 June—7 July), Palayamkottai (12 August—28 August), and Trichur (4 December—24 December). During this workshop the following fieldwork was done:

1. On 14 August from 7:00 p.m. onwards, data were collected during the Peeraacciyamman temple festival at Palayamkottai in the temple premises by watching the *KaaLiyaaTTam* performance of Ramakrishnan and by interviewing members of the audience.
2. On the next day I went with M. Ramasamy to Ramakrishnan's house to interview him. Immediately after we arrived, however, Ramakrishnan took us out to a public place and gave separate interviews to both of us. He had performed the previous day without informing his wife. Fearing that his wife might find out about his performance the previous night, he did not want to talk with us at his house. Our interviews were recorded and are preserved at the Folklore Department, St. Xavier's College, Palayamkottai.
3. On 18 August I interviewed Ramakrishnan and his wife separately in his house. Before the interview I had promised Ramakrishnan outside the house



FIGURE 1. Mr. Ramakrishnan having his make-up put on.



FIGURE 2. Mr. Ramakrishnan in *KaaLiveesam*.



FIGURE 3. Paccaikkaali (green KaaLi) resting between processions in Kumbakonam in Thanjavur District.

that his *KaaLiyaaTTam* performance on 14 August would not be part of the interview with his wife. Some time after the interview he expressed how happy he was that I successfully interviewed his wife without breaking my promise.

4. In order to clarify my doubts about the data that had been collected through interviews and to gather more information, I did more fieldwork on 18 September 1990, the first day of the Dussera festival. I watched the entire *KaaLiyaaTTam* performance at Peeraacciyamman temple from 5:30 p.m. till 5:30 a.m. the next day when the procession reached Aayiratamman temple. Interviews were also conducted during this time.

5. Data were collected from another *KaaLiyaaTTam* performer's wife, Mrs. Chendu (40) in Palayamkottai.³

Attempts were made to answer the questions raised at the beginning of this article from the data collected. A second phase of fieldwork was also undertaken between March and April 1991.

1. From 28 March to 3 March a *Srimaturakaaliyamman KaaLitirunaTanam* performance at Aduthurai in the Thanjavur District was observed and data were collected on it. Data were also collected on the same performance at VaTapatrakaaLiyamman temple of Thirumangalakudi near Aduthurai. To supplement this fieldwork, a video recording that was made of a similar performance at Thirumangalakudi in March 1990 was watched and the performer in the video, Mr. Pranan, a lawyer by profession, was interviewed.

2. Between 11 April 1991 and 21 April 1991 fieldwork was undertaken in Ammaiappan of Thanjavur District, and in Nagapattinam, Jeyankondam, Udayarpalayam, and Keelapazhur of Tiruchirappalli District.

To find if there is any relationship between a performing art and the life history of its performer, let us first examine whether there is any relationship between the life history of Ramakrishnan and the *KaaLiyaaTTam* he performs on the basis of the data collected during the first phase of the fieldwork.

Ramakrishnan was born in 1944 in Naranammalpuram, a village in Tirunelveli District. When he was two years old, his father died; from then on his mother brought him up at Yaatavar UccinimaakaaLiyamman temple street in Palayamkottai. UccinimaakaaLiyamman is his maternal female deity. Therefore, he used to visit frequently UccinimaakaaLiyamman and KaaLi temples along with his mother. This paved the way for his faith in and piety for KaaLi.

When he was ten, he had seen a certain Mr. Sankarakonar dressing himself as KaaLi. Though he had been initially frightened by this huge figure,

it eventually made an impression on him. The following statement by Ramakrishnan shows how Sankarakonar acted as his guru and encouraged Ramakrishnan to take on the role of KaaLi in *KaaLiyaaTTam*:

It used to be frightening whenever Sankarakonar played the role of KaaLi. His figure used to appear in my mind even after his death. In such a time I used to feel as if his figure was bidding me “to take a step forward” to perform *KaaLiyaaTTam*.

Ramakrishnan was studying at St. Xavier’s School, Palayamkottai, in the eighth grade. Since he failed his examinations, he had to move to Sankar School in Thaazhaiyoothu. Even there he did not pass his final exams. Later he joined a government aided Muslim School as a higher grade teacher. At the age of twenty-two he married an uneducated woman with whom he now has two daughters and a son.

As a grown-up he was impious, a trait that his wife used to criticize him for. According to Ramakrishnan, however, one day in the early 1970s when he was worshiping his paternal deity,¹ KumpamaaTasaamy, the deity suddenly entered into him. This caused him to fall into a trance, during which he danced and swallowed fire. People who witnessed this event worshiped him, and he in return gave them *vaakku* (prophecy or fortune telling).

In 1973 he was critically ill with an acute stomach ache and fever. Despite worshiping his family deity, KumpamaaTan, his condition did not improve. He believed that the deity had abandoned him. Then he vowed to KaaLi that he would take upon himself the ritual role of KaaLi at Aayiratamman temple for three consecutive years if granted the blessing of restored health. He worshiped KaaLi, the mother of KumpamaaTan, and the maternal family deity of Ramakrishnan, and drank water mixed with holy ash (*vipuuti*). The moment he was cured, he began to believe that the goddess KaaLi had made him ill in order to test him before accepting him as her devotee.

In order to fulfill his vow, he began to perform *KaaLiyaaTTam* in 1974 for the first time. He describes what he experienced within at that moment in the following words:

I experienced a strong fear when I dressed myself as KaaLi for the first time. The headgear that they placed on my head was so heavy that I felt as if a rock were put on my head. Feeling caught in an unwanted situation, I cried and shed tears. I was unable to move a bit when they put the headgear on my head and fitted artificial hands onto my hands and along my shoulders. One cannot walk on his own when he is in the ritual

costume of KaaLi; but with divine grace it is possible. Two men would accompany me, holding me in their hands. After taking me around for some distance and worshipping KaaLi, they would remove the artificial hands and relieve me from my role as KaaLi. It was not possible for me to dance at that time.

To take *KaaLiveesam* (i.e., the guise of KaaLi) upon oneself is a role widely considered to be very difficult. It is said that the person concerned should fast for eight days, failing this he would be punished by KaaLi. I could see the hardship of this role when I observed the process of *KaaLiveesam* on 18 September 1990. On that day at 5:30 p.m. after having a bath in the Thamiraparani River, Ramakrishnan went to Peeraacciyamman temple to adore the deity with light (Tiipaaraatanai) and finally got the permission of Amman (i.e., the goddess KaaLi) for wearing *KaaLiveesam*. Then he dressed himself as KaaLi in the presence of the devotees with the assistance of three persons (see figures 1 and 2).

The costume of *KaaLiveesam* consists of the following: a beautifully decorated headgear made of cardboard and tin; long artificial hair that hangs from the back of the headgear; artificial eyes (*kanmalar*) made of tin sheets with tiny holes that enable the performer to see, at least somewhat, that which is just in front of him; monstrous tin teeth at the sides of the mouth; a hanging tongue; red facial paint; eight artificial hands (four on each side) made from the bark of a tree, iron, and thick cardboard; artificial breasts made of cloth; a red sari; a garland of human faces made of cardboard; a jewel for wearing at the waist (*oTTiyaanam*); heavy anklets; and, finally, a heavy iron sword that is carried by hand. All together the costume weighs about fifteen kilograms.

The total duration of a *KaaLiyaaTTam* performance is twelve hours, from dusk to dawn. While wearing the costume, Ramakrishnan gives *vaakku* to those who eagerly await them. Then he worships Peeraacciyamman and walks towards Aayiratamman temple, passing through each street. The total distance may be about ten kilometers. Now and then he jumps, whirls about, and dances. Because of his vigorous movements, all the articles of the costume, such as the headgear, hands, sari, and anklets, are tied very tightly to prevent them from falling off him. When the knots are tightened his facial expression reveals his pain, and he shouts in a high-spirited voice. Devotees consider his shouting to be the spiritual voice of KaaLi, which is partly why he does it. He probably also shouts for mental relief from the pain.

He bids the *makuTam* player to play the instrument fast whenever he (Ramakrishnan) feels the pain. This helps him dance faster so he will not feel too much pain and mental fatigue. Ramakrishnan says that the music of

maḥuTam has the power to summon the deity and that it is to the performer what petrol fuel is to a car.

People see him as KaaLi when he is in *KaaLiveesam*. He is with the people during the entire twelve-hour performance. Therefore, it is not possible for him to answer nature's calls—an extremely difficult task.

As Ramakrishnan still felt pain after his seventeenth year of performing, we can imagine how difficult it must have been in his first year. However, he believes he had to go through the hardship in the first three years in order to fulfill the promise he made to KaaLi.

What made him continue playing the role of KaaLi even after he fulfilled his vow of three years? Ramakrishnan gives the following two reasons: (1) an old lady in Vinaayakar temple ordered him not to stop taking on *KaaLiveesam* after three years; (2) he had constant dreams of *KaaLiveesam*.

The reasons Ramakrishnan gives, however, might not be the true reasons for why he continued to perform *KaaLiyaaTTam*. Some incidents that took place in his life in the first three years of performing this ritual I think influenced his decision to continue performing.

First, he decided to become an ascetic after frequent quarrels with his wife that led a relative to ask “How can you, the one who performs *KaaLiyaaTTam*, behave like this?” Ramakrishnan says this rhetorical question changed him. Second, he got a job in a Panchayat Union School at the time because he was not satisfied with the job he had in a private school. He believes that this was a favor granted by the deity for performing *KaaLiyaaTTam*.

Does he continue to perform out of sheer expectation of similar benefits in the future? I think to a certain extent that he does. But, it cannot be the only reason why he continues to appear as KaaLi. What other reasons might there be?

Let us first examine the economic situation of Ramakrishnan and his family. Ramakrishnan, two years before he started to perform *KaaLiyaaTTam*, worked as a secondary grade teacher with a very small salary. With his meager salary, he had to support his family, which consisted of his mother, wife, himself, and three children who were students. When I interviewed him, however, his salary was more than Rs. 2000 a month, his wife earned some money by selling the milk of their cow, and all his children were earning money: his eldest daughter, having finished school, worked as a teacher for a very low monthly salary of Rs. 200; his son was working in a mosaic company; and his youngest daughter is employed making cigarettes. His son and youngest daughter together earned about Rs. 450 per month. He has also shifted his residence from an uncomfortable house to a more comfortable rented one. This shows the improvement of the economic situation in his family

since he started to perform *KaaLiyaaTTam*.

Now let us examine whether he gains any economic benefits from performing *KaaLiyaaTTam*. Temple authorities usually invite performers to their temple and pay them, but this is not the case with *KaaLiyaaTTam* in Tirunelveli District. As *KaaLiyaaTTam* is considered to be the fulfillment of a vow that was made to receive benefits, it is the performers who have to pay rental charges for the costume, give tips, and pay the make-up artists, the *maḱuTam* players, and the assistants. Furthermore, he has to host a sumptuous dinner for his close relatives. The total cost to him is at least Rs. 1000. The wife of Kandan, another *KaaLiyaaTTam* performer, confirmed this. Kandan, who had fasted for the sake of performing *KaaLiyaaTTam* on 22 August 1990 at Aayiratamman temple, finally gave up performing because it was financially difficult for him to meet the expenses that were necessary to perform *KaaLiyaaTTam*. During the first ten years that Ramakrishnan performed, he had to take money out of his own pocket to pay for his performance. Only after ten years was he able to change this. He now gets money for his performances from acquaintances and from wealthy supporters who have worshiped him for at least six years when he is in *KaaLiveesam*.

Ten years ago during a KumpamaaTan festival he started giving *vaakḱu* (divine prophecy) as part of his *KaaLiyaaTTam* performance. During one performance, as he removed his monstrous teeth and hanging tongue to drink some water, he observed an expression of happiness come over a spectator's face to whom he had given *vaakḱu*. Ramakrishnan says that as soon as he puts on *KaaLiveesam*, his *vaakḱu* are very powerful and actually do come true. Because of this, spectators, especially women, compete with each other to receive his *vaakḱu*. I witnessed this in person. He asks the people to bear a part of the expense of the performance in the following year as an offering if the *vaakḱu* he gives comes true. The devotees abide by this and people even offer him sari. His economic gains due to *vaakḱu* are considerable.

His close relatives give him some money on the day he takes on the role of KaaLi. But, as he is obligated to reciprocate an equivalent amount to his relatives during their temple festival, the money cannot be considered as earnings. He said that he manages the expenses for *KaaLiyaaTTam* both with the amount he gets from relatives and from his *vaakḱu*.

On 14 August 1990 Ramakrishnan performed *KaaLiyaaTTam* at Peeraacciyamman temple without the knowledge of his wife. He said he hid this performance from his wife because she objects to his giving *vaakḱu* while in *KaaLiveesam*. She had warned him that KaaLi's anger would befall them if the money gained through *KaaLiveesam* is not spent solely on KaaLi. Ramakrishnan says that he agrees with spending the entire amount

on KaaLi, but if this were true the problem would not have arisen between him and his wife. It is of course understandable that he would want to save a small portion of the income received through *KaaLiyaaTTam* after paying for the incurred expenses. It should not be said, however, that he goes through the hardship of putting on *KaaLiveesam* just for the sake of the meager amount that he gets only once a year, especially since he only recently started to receive money.

If it is not primarily for money, then why does he continue to put on *KaaLiveesam*? I think Ramakrishnan may continue to perform *KaaLiyaaTTam* because of an inferiority complex. He belongs to the Yatava caste, who live in unsophisticated communities. He was brought up by his maternal relatives when he was young. He made an attempt to get educated in an old school, but he could not succeed in his studies. He used to feel that he could not get a higher post because of his poor education. He also feels sad that he is poor and is very much worried about his economic position.

When he is in *KaaLiveesam*, people, irrespective of caste, gender, age, education, occupation, and economic status, prostrate at his feet and worship him. He is proud that even the retired Sub-Collector, the Inspector of Police, and big merchants are among his worshippers. People compete with each other to get his *vaakku* about their future. They make offerings with joy and happiness when the *vaakku* come true. He said that he is addressed as *saami* even when he is not in *KaaLiveesam* and that such respect gives him much happiness. Ramakrishnan said that a rich man sick with smallpox sought his blessings and addressed him as *amma* (a term for addressing KaaLi) and thus identified Ramakrishnan with KaaLi. He continued to say that the rich man was healed when he sang in praise of the deity. All these incidents have contributed to the growth of his self-confidence and make him think that he too is a man of high esteem in his society. These incidents make him believe that he has the grace of KaaLi and can therefore help others.

Knowing that Calcutta is famous for its KaaLi worship in India, Ramakrishnan says that it is "Calcutta KaaLi" who gives him divine power. He is proud and happy to liken himself to the well-known Hindu sage and ardent devotee of KaaLi Ramakrishna Paramahamsar on the basis of their similar names and devotion of KaaLi. All this gives him happiness and fulfillment.

With this background, I suggest that he continues to perform *KaaLiyaaTTam* primarily for psychological reasons. From what has been said so far, it is not difficult to see the relationship between the life history of Ramakrishnan and his performance of *KaaLiyaaTTam*. The impact of this relationship on Ramakrishnan's *KaaLiyaaTTam*, however, still needs to be shown.

For a performing art to be successful, the role of the audience is of great importance. Ramakrishnan, having decided to continue to perform *KaaLi-yaaTTam*, exerts much effort to attract an audience. He has made the costume items such as the artificial hands and headgear for his own size instead of renting them every time he gives a performance. He uses a long real knife instead of a knife made out of cardboard and pays special attention to his make-up and costume items in general.

Saying *vaakku* during *KaaLi-yaaTTam* is not practiced by anyone else. Ramakrishnan has incorporated this into *KaaLi-yaaTTam* for the past ten years. We can even say that he has transformed *KaaLi-yaaTTam* from being a visual art into a verbal art. He says that the audience has increased after this transformation; that is, after he began to say *vaakku*.

He does not say *vaakku* to everyone. After saying it to some, he asks the rest of the devotees to come to a performance of his at a specific place and time. Having faith and trust in him, people often go to the place that he specifies. This is probably a technique he uses to spread his popularity in many places and to increase the size of his audiences.

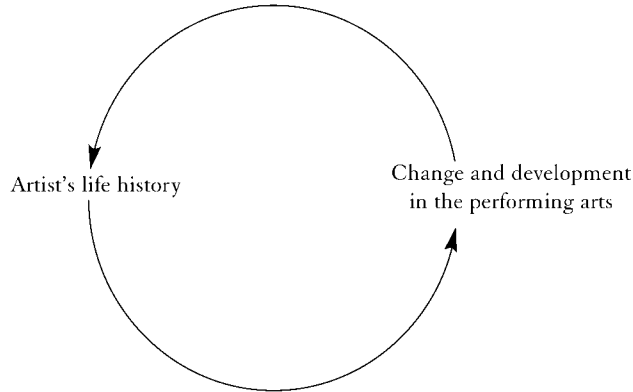
As a beginner in *KaaLi-yaaTTam*, Ramakrishnan would not dance; it was only later that he began to dance to the music of *maakuTam*. As he has been performing regularly for many years now, he does not experience much difficulty in putting on *KaaLiveesam*. One spectator who has regularly attended the performances of all such artists, including Ramakrishnan, said that the others do not perform as well as Ramakrishnan.

He began his career by performing at a temple for the goddess Aayiratamman during Dussera festival, but since 1980 he has put on the *KaaLiveesam* at the temple of Peeraacciyamman, the sister of Aayiratamman, and walks towards Aayiratamman temple. People watch his dance performance throughout this route. By doing this, the area covered during his performance becomes wider and the size of his audience increases.

Earlier he used to perform only once during the Dussera festival, but now he performs twice at the same festival. On 14 September 1990 he performed for the first time twice during the festival at Peeraacciyamman temple. This shows the increase in the number of his performances. Moreover, on 14 August 1990, he performed at the invitation of the trustees of the temple and, according to him, the trustees met a portion of the expenses for the performance. This is a significant change with regard to this performing art because it indicates a transition in *KaaLi-yaaTTam* from being a part of the temple ritual into becoming a professional art.

On the basis of Ramakrishnan's experience we can see how certain incidents in the life of the artist contribute to the art and, at the same time, how changes in the art contribute to the life of the artist. This can be illustrated

in the following manner:



As above mentioned findings are limited to the *KaaLiyaaTTam* performed by Ramakrishnan in Palayamkottai of Tirunelveli District, it is worth asking to what extent they are applicable to the same art performed by other artists in other places. We can attempt to find an answer to this by briefly examining *KaaLiyaaTTam* and its artists in the districts of Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli.

COMPARISON

In the southern districts anybody can perform *KaaLiyaaTTam*, but in the northern districts of Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli only family members of a *KaaLiyaaTTam* performer have the right to perform it. A newcomer is not allowed to perform. Following the example set by the elders, the younger generation are faithful and dedicated to KaaLi. It is their dedication that makes them perform *KaaLiyaaTTam* in *KaaLiveesam*. Therefore, it is not necessary to search the life history of most individual performers to find reasons why they perform *KaaLiyaaTTam*.

In the KaaLi temples of the districts of Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli, the headgear and the hands of the KaaLi costume, which are preserved for many years, are made of fig tree wood and decorated with colorful paints. After seven days of strict fasting, the performer wears the wooden headgear of the KaaLi costume. While dressed as KaaLi the performer is able to see what is happening around him through the nostrils of the wooden mask. The wooden hands and headgear together weigh about forty kilograms. A minimum of three long garlands are put around the neck of the performer, which add to the weight he has to bear. He carries in his hands a small knife and a shield made of wood. During the performance the wooden headgear

is supported by an assistant, and the wooden hands are supported by two assistants to prevent them from falling off. Even though it is very difficult to breathe with the wooden headgear on, the performer has to keep his costume on during his twelve- to sixteen-hour procession through the streets. He is also obliged to dance sporadically to the music of *naiyaanTi meeLam* in the streets and on the stages temporarily put up in the streets. On watching this, I could see that the *KaaLiyaaTTam* performers in the districts of Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli go through more hardships than those in Palayamkottai.

As the temple management bears the expenses for the costume and make-up, the performer does not have to spend anything on these in the northern districts. Also, the performer does not receive anything in return for *KaaLiyaaTTam* in these areas. The offerings made by the devotees go to the temple. In Udayarpalayam of Tiruchirappalli District, however, a portion of the offerings is taken by the performer because the priest (*puujaari*) is the one who puts on *KaaLiveesam*. As the amount received is very little, it is clear that the performers in these areas do not perform for economic benefits.

If there is no economic incentive for performing *KaaLiyaaTTam*, there must be another reason for why so many enthusiastically come forward to bear the pain and hardship of putting on *KaaLiveesam*. Even if it is a hereditary right, what makes the younger generation want to get involved? The psychological reason inferred from the case of Ramakrishnan seems to be applicable here too. The people who put on *KaaLiveesam* here belong to the Vanniya caste who live in technologically unsophisticated communities with very low educational and economic status. In Udayarpalayam it is members of the weaver caste of Mudaliar that have low educational and economic status who put on *KaaLiveesam*. A lawyer by profession, Mr. Pranam of Thirumangalakudi, who performs *KaaLiyaaTTam*, is an exception to this rule as he comes from a middle class family. He believes that the sole reason for his higher status is the grace of KaaLi. When the ritual procession in *KaaLiveesam* takes place, every house is decorated, and KaaLi is invited to sit in the courtyard of each house. When the KaaLi performer is seated, he is offered coconut, fruit, and a ritual lamp; then, after camphor is lit, members of the household prostrate before KaaLi to receive his blessings. People irrespective of caste, gender, age, occupation, and educational status, receive the blessings of KaaLi; even brahmins (higher caste people) receive blessings from him. It is widely believed that the performer is actually KaaLi. The worship of KaaLi during *KaaLiyaaTTam* is done with deeper devotion, and it is given more importance here than in Tirunelveli District. The performers of *KaaLiyaaTTam* are very pleased with the attention and devotion

they receive. They clearly acknowledge this, as is evident from Pranan's statement: "We cannot gain such happiness even if we were given one crore of rupees as a gift."

From what has been said so far, we are able to understand the relationship between the performers of *KaaLiyaaTTam* in the districts of Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli and the art they perform. I will now examine the relationship to see if it influences the performing art to the extent of effecting changes in its form.

The performers may only use the make-up and costume items, especially the head and hands of KaaLi, that are traditionally preserved in the temples. Therefore, here one cannot exercise his creativity and make changes. The annual festival of the temple takes place during a specific month every year. The exact dates are fixed by the authority of the temple. Outside this festival context one cannot use the head and hands of KaaLi. Therefore, the performer cannot extend the duration of the performance. Since it is the authority of the temple who arranges even the space for the performance, the performers of the northern districts, unlike Ramakrishnan, cannot extend the arena (i.e., the space of performance) on their own. This being the case, are the performers in a position to do something to develop this more elite form of *KaaLiyaaTTam* called *KaaLi tirunaTanam*? The answer is yes because something is being done. What is being done and how?

In these districts, the annual festival of KaaLi takes place for two or three days. Therefore, four or five persons put on *KaaLiveesam* alternatively. The spectators become unofficial judges and identify the best performer. They gossip among themselves about who is the best KaaLi. Besides this, *KaaLi tirunaTanam* is performed in many other villages. Those who watch all these performances, talk among themselves about the differences between various performances in various villages. When I observed them, people of each village spoke highly of the performance in their respective native villages. Being aware of this comparative tendency of the people, the performers become more involved in their performances. They introduce new techniques into their dance. One performer, for example, did a snake dance while in the attire of KaaLi, while another danced with a *tirisulam* (trident)⁵ in his hand.

In the state of Tamil Nadu *KaaLiyaaTTam* is a ritual art of worship, which has become a professional art to some extent in the district of Thanjavur. In other districts it is possible for anyone to attain higher status in Hinduism through fasting and devotion (*bakti*).⁶ But in Thanjavur District, only hereditary performers can attain this status. This is an impediment to the non-hereditary new entrants who wish to attain higher status.

Those who have not inherited the right to perform *KaaLiyaaTTam* have turned it into a professional art by introducing new styles and techniques to it. Mr. Chadatcharam who performs *KaaLiyaaTTam* belongs to the untouchable barber caste. He has been affected by his status as an untouchable and has not inherited the right to perform *KaaLiyaaTTam*. Consequently, he has made it a professional art and thereby is able to earn money, social respect, self satisfaction, and self confidence. He feels happy that he is identified with KaaLi, and worshiped by people when he puts on *KaaLiveesam*. He also plays the role of Siva (god of destruction) and KaaTTeeri (a kind of devil). But as the demands for *KaaLiveesam* are more than the others, he opts mostly for performing *KaaLiveesam*. He uses his own make-up and has made his own costume items as small detachable units that can be joined together at the time of performance. He also gives special attention to make-up and costumes. He claims that *KaaLiyaaTTam* has turned into a professional art only in the past fifteen years.

CONCLUSION

From the above study we can see that the performing art of *KaaLiyaaTTam* is closely related to the life history of its performers. The benefits of performing it are not economic but psychological. The findings from the case study of Ramakrishnan indicates that the psychological benefit is the major influencing factor among performers in the Tiruchirappalli and Thanjavur districts, although the reasons given by performers for why they do *KaaLiyaaTTam* are somewhat different. In short, it can be concluded that there is a mutually influential relationship between the performance and the performer of *KaaLiyaaTTam*.

NOTES

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1. *Terukkuuttu* is a traditional street play performed mostly throughout the night by a male troupe accompanied by some musical instruments.

2. The description given here is based on the ritual I observed about twenty-five years ago at Vadapakkarn of Chidarnbararn Taluk, South Arcot District, Tamil Nadu.

3. Mr. Kandan (53) is a construction worker. His father used to put on *KaaLiveesam* at Aayiratamman temple. After the death of his father he put on *KaaLiveesam*. He had already finished five performances before I went to his house for an interview. Since he was not available when I reached his house, I interviewed his wife.

4. A paternal deity is a deity that a person inherits an association with through patrilineal kin.

5. Lord Siva and KaaLi are often depicted as holding a *tirisulam*.

6. Ayyappan worship (a popular male deity worshiped in Kerala and Tamil Nadu) is very popular among the people. In this form of worship, caste and rights of inheritance are not obstacles to attaining higher status. Such worship transcends all social barriers. Anyone belonging to any caste who fasts can become a *saami* (god) by dressing himself in a “saffron” cloth or in a color of his own choice. This is a common means by which people gain self-confidence and happiness. Anyone who takes on a journey to Sabarimalai (a pilgrimage mountain) every year gets promoted to the status of a *periya* (big) *saami* and receives the right to guide others. It is this dimension of gaining higher status that attracts multitudes of people to participate in these forms of worship. Only men are allowed to participate in such worship, and women are thus deprived of the opportunity to attain divine status. Women can, however, achieve divine status in the Melmaruvathur Aatiparaasakti worship of Bangaru Adigal—a contemporary Hindu religious leader, who popularized a Sakti cult in Tamil Nadu. In this form of worship, which is very popular, especially among women, women have a dominant role. In it we find *saktis* instead of *saamis* dressed in the colors yellow and red. The notion that anyone can become a *sakti* continues to attract many women to this worship. Both of these types of worship can be understood as expedient as anybody can attain higher status through fasting and abstaining from prohibited habits, while not having to forgo any earthly pleasures once the fasting ends. It is the expedience of Ayyappan and Sakti forms of worship that make them so popular.

INFORMANTS

(The details are given in order of name, age, academic qualification, caste, and address.)

Chatacharam, K., 52, Navithar (Barber), Pignanarkoil, Kakkazhani post, Adiyakkamangalam-via, Thiruvavur Taluk, Thanjavur District. (Professional artist).

Kalimuthu, 53, S.S.L.C., Padayatchi, Thirumangalakudy, Thiruvudaimaruthur Taluk, Thanjavur District. (Manager of the Temple).

Natarasan, M., 55, Fifth Standard, Padayatchi, 32a, Kanchan Mettu Street, Aduthurai. (Temple Manager-cum-performer).

Navaneethan, 40, Kodalikkaruppur, Tiruchirappalli District. (Other details not collected, Spectator).

Pranan, R., 35, B.A., B.L., Padayatchi, Thirumangalakudi, Thanjavur District (Performer).

Ramakrishnan, M., 46, S.S.L.C., Yadava, L-176, Police Colony, Shanthi Nagar, Palayamkottai, Nellore District. (Performer).

Ramasamy, P., 41, S.S.L.C., Senguntha Mudaliar, VellaPillaiyar Koil Street, Udayarapalayam Post, Tiruchirappalli District (Performer).

Sankaranpillai, K., 62, Ninth standard, Shozhiva Vellalar, Nagapattinam, Nagai-QM. District (Professional artist).

Seeralan, 50, (unknown), Muthaliyar, Keelappazhur, Tiruchirappalli District (Spectator).

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