

The Origin of Kathakali: Dance-Drama of India

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The social structure, the foreign influences and the religious devotion of Kerala exerted a strong influence on the development of the various forms of dance and dance-drama. This is particularly evident in Kathakali, India's major traditional dance-drama form. Kathakali is a synthesis of many arts and periods of development built upon the framework of the Sanskrit tradition in theatre and strongly influenced by the indigenous, Dravidian culture of the South. The tradition of Kathakali probably originated in the middle of the seventeenth century, a period in Kerala's history which saw great developments in literature and the arts. Its origin, however, can be traced in part to Kutiyattam which originated in the tenth Century.

Kutiyattam was originally used by the Aryans to reenact the stories and legends of the gods. A reciter would speak from a platform in the temple accompanied by musicians. He would expound on the Sanskrit texts often holding the attention of his listeners by an amusing discourse. The reciter accomplished this through mime and gestures. This was later absorbed and emphasized by Kathakali. Kutiyattam as a gesture-emphasis for Sanskrit texts developed into an elaborate production incorporating character roles with special costumes and make-up. These conventions were also later absorbed into Kathakali. Today Kutiyattam is the only surviving traditional form for presenting Sanskrit drama in India. The religious practices, and the techniques of these two cultural streams. The Dravidians were peaceful, religious people devoted to Bhagvati, the Earth — Mother goddess. The aggressive Aryans drove them to the forests, where today, they survive as aboriginal tribes.

The coming of the Aryan Brahmins resulted in changes of social and religious customs. The off-spring of intermarriages between Aryans and Dravidians resulted in a caste of warriors, the Nayars, who responded to the music, dance and religious mores of both races. The Aryans, or Brahmins, encouraged the Nayar caste and, in time, the two cultures became one. The Dravidian goddess Bhagvati became identified with the mother goddess of the Aryans, Kali.

The Nayars were a highly disciplined and scientifically taught military caste. Special messages and exercises were given to them to develop their suppleness, agility and strength. Training took place in sunken gymnasiums known as kalaris, beginning each morning at 3 A.M. and ending late at night. They were not only trained in the skills of war, but also in how to obtain psychological advantage over their opponents. This was achieved through instructions in mime, gesture and acting. A Nayar's deportment was intended to portray his own superiority and confidence and to arouse fear in his opponent.

Gradually the need for the Nayar to fight diminished, but they continued their military practices through dance-drama. To this dance-drama they brought their skill and training techniques. They became the actors in the religious plays of the Brahmins. Even today the exponents of the dance-dramas are mostly Nayars.

Contemporary Kathakali is making a slow but dangerous transition from its original function as a socio-religious art form operating within the traditional culture, to the modern commercial theatre stage. Its roots are buried deep within the religion, the culture and the political precincts of Kerala.

The need for further research on Indian dance and dance-drama forms is critical. The changing society of India tends to replace traditional aesthetic values in favor of the newer Western arts.