

kathakali

dance-drama

where gods and demons
come to play

phillip b. zarrilli



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kathakali

dance-drama

Kathakali, the distinctive dance-drama of Kerala in south-west India, is comprehensively presented and illuminated in this unique book. During these performances heroes, heroines, gods, and demons tell their stories from traditional Indian epics. The four *kathakali* plays included in this anthology, translated from actual performances into English, are:

- *The Flower of Good Fortune*
- *The Killing of Kirmira*
- *The Progeny of Krishna*
- *King Rugmangada's Law*.

One of the few books published on this genre, and based on extensive first-hand research, the book:

- explores *kathakali's* reception as it reaches new audiences both in India and the west
- includes two case studies of controversial *kathakali* experiments
- explores the implications for *kathakali* of Kerala politics.

Each play has an introduction and detailed commentary, and is illustrated by stunning photographs taken during performances. A comprehensive introduction to *kathakali* stage conventions, make-up, music, acting, and training is also provided, making this an ideal volume for both the specialist and the non-specialist reader.

Phillip B. Zarrilli is Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Surrey. He is the author of *The Kathakali Complex* (1984) and the editor of *Acting (Re)Considered* (Routledge 1995).

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for
mozie and larry



with thanks
for their love, inspiration,
and guidance

and for kor

contents



List of illustrations ix

Preface xi

Acknowledgments xv

1 An ‘Ocean of Possibilities’ 1

part i **performance in the kerala context**

2 A Social History of *Kathakali* Patronage, Connoisseurship, and Aesthetics 17

3 *Kathakali* Texts in Performance 39

4 What Does it Mean ‘To Become the Character’?: *Kathakali* Actor Training and Characterization 65

part ii **plays from the traditional repertory**

5 *The Flower of Good Fortune (Kalyanasaugandhikam)* Kottayam Tampuran 101
Introduction 101
Commentary 113

6 *The Killing of Kirmira (Kirmiravadham)* Kottayam Tampuran 118
Introduction 118
Commentary 130

- 7 *The Progeny of Krishna (Santanagopalam)* Mandavappalli Ittiraricha Menon 135
Introduction 135
Commentary 151
- 8 *King Rugmangada's Law (Rugmangada caritam)* Mandavappalli Ittiraricha Menon 159
Introduction 159
Commentary 169

part iii

contested narratives: new plays, discourses, and contexts

- 9 For Whom *is* the King a King? Issues of Intercultural Production, Perception, and Reception in a *Kathakali King Lear* 177
- 10 When Marx met Imperialism on the *Kathakali* Stage 196
- Afterword: Whose Gods, and Whose Demons Dance?* 206
- Appendix: Kathakali Performances on Video* 209
- Notes* 212
- Bibliography and References Cited* 231
- Glossary and Table of Transliteration* 242
- Index* 253

illustrations



FIGURES

- 0.1 Location of Kerala within India xiii
- 2.1 The Kerala caste hierarchy 21
- 3.1 Schematic diagram of typical *kathakali* structure 42
- 3.2 Performance of dialogue (*padam*), Chart 1 46
- 3.3 Performance of dialogue (*padam*), Chart 2 48
- 3.4 Summary: performance of a line from *Prahladacaritam* 49
- 3.5 Traditional outdoor performance 50
- 3.6 Theater plan of the Kuttampalam Theater 51
- 3.7 Traditional all-night structure of a performance 52
- 3.8 *Kathakali* drums 58
- 3.9 *Kathakali*'s rhythmic patterns 60
- 3.10 Cycles of repetition and elaboration in *kathakali* performance 64
- 4.1 The *kathakali* actor's process: an overview 67
- 4.2 The *kathakali* actor's process: synthesizing the 'external' and the 'internal' 69
- 4.3 *Kathakali* training at the Kerala Kalamandalam 71
- 4.4 Eye exercises 72
- 4.5 Kerala Kalamandalam syllabus 81
- 4.6 *Bhava* in performance 85
- 4.7 Filling out the form 90
- 5.1 Key to textual and performance terms 103

PLATES

(Note: all photographs are by the author except as otherwise noted.)

- 2.1 A *Kathakali* performance photograph from early twentieth century 23
- 3.1 A make-up specialist applies rice-paste 57
- 4.1 One of the Southern-style *kathakali* jumps 71
- 4.2 The twenty-four root hand-gestures 74
- 4.3 The nine basic facial expressions, plus one 77
- 4.4 *Colliyattam* of *The Killing of Lavanasura*: Lava and Kusa 80
- 4.5 *Colliyattam* of *The Killing of Lavanasura*: Hanuman 82
- 5.1 Bhima and Panchali embrace 105
- 5.2 Ramankutty Nayar Asan in the role of Hanuman 107
- 5.3 Hanuman exhibits his divine form for Bhima 112
- 6.1 Simhika's curtain look 120
- 6.2 Simhika entices Panchali to go to the Durga temple 123
- 6.3 Simhika reveals her 'true' form 124
- 6.4 Sahadeva intercepts Simhika 126
- 6.5 Simhika howls in pain through the audience 128
- 7.1 The Brahmin pours out his tale of woe at Krishna's court 139
- 7.2 The Brahmin's wife helped by the village Midwife 145
- 7.3 Brahmin dances with joy at the return of his seventh son 149
- 8.1 Rugmamgada in a state of disbelief 166
- 8.2 Rugmamgada about to cut off Dharmamgada's head 167
- 8.3 Rugmamgada enters a transformative state of 'fury' 168
- 9.1 *Kathakali King Lear* 185
- 9.2 Mad Tom discovered by Lear and the Fool 186
- 9.3 Dress rehearsal: Lear revealed to be like Mad Tom 190
- 9.4 The trial scene in *Lear* 191
- 9.5 Lear: 'She's gone forever.' 193

preface



Kathakali dance-drama is a distinctive genre of South Asian performance which developed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Malayalam speaking coastal region of south-west India known today as Kerala State (Figure 0.1). Like Japanese *noh* and China's *jingju* (Beijing Opera), *kathakali* has become internationally known during the past thirty to thirty-five years as troupes regularly tour throughout the world as part of government-sponsored international cultural exchanges or through private initiative. The vast majority of these performances have been *kathakali*'s dance-drama versions of episodes from the Indian epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana) or stories from the *puranas*—encyclopedic collections of traditional stories and knowledge. While there is a long history of 'experimentation' with content and technique, recent performances of new *kathakali* have brought increasing attention to and arguments about the place and role of experimentation and change in *kathakali* performance today.

This book takes account of *kathakali* as a distinctive 'traditional' genre of dance-drama performance particular to India's south-west coast, its entry into the transnational flow of global cultures as it is performed for tourists within Kerala and for new audiences in India and the West, and how *kathakali* interacts with and responds to contemporary politics in Kerala where the first democratically elected Communist state government came

to power in 1957. Based on extensive ethnographic research in Kerala, India, conducted between 1976–77 and the present, this book articulates the dynamic set of relationships between dramatic/performance text(s), techniques and structures of performance, and reception among *kathakali*'s multiple audiences. It describes and analyses how the same *kathakali* performance can appeal to *kathakali*'s highly sophisticated connoisseurs whose reception is a refined aesthetic 'of the mind,' as well as make a seven-year-old child break into tears. The book is based on observation of performances, archival research at *kathakali* schools and institutions, extensive interviews with *kathakali* actors and appreciators, collaborative work on translations of the *kathakali* plays included in the volume, and the experience of training in *kathakali* techniques.

Although the theoretical and methodological backdrop for *When Gods and Demons Come to Play* is similar to my earlier study of *kathakali*, *The Kathakali Complex: Actor, Performance, Structure* (1984a), this book focuses on texts-in-performance by including four plays in translation with introductions and commentaries, and two case studies of *kathakali* experiments—none of which appeared in my first book. For the general reader, I provide an introduction to *kathakali* make-up, stage conventions, music, and acting. For those most interested in details of technique, I refer the reader to *The Kathakali Complex*.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

Whenever possible we have attempted to keep close to the word order of the Malayalam texts; however, it has often been necessary to alter the word order of the text for clarity in translation. This is especially true of the third-person descriptive *sloka* which string together long lists of phrases which modify the subject. For example, in the first *sloka* of *The Progeny of Krishna*, the subject, Hari (Vishnu in his manifestation as lord Krishna), is not found until the fifth line. Four modifying phrases begin the *sloka*. In our translation we often place the subject first, followed by the modifiers. For the individual watching the video performance of one of the plays-in-translation, this transposition for ease of reading results in a substantial difference in word order between the text in translation and the (video) performance. An exact correlation would only be possible in a literal word-by-word translation.

In Chapters 5–8, two types of notes on the plays in performance are included. Those essential for a non-specialist's understanding of the play are given as footnotes. Technical or textual notes of interest to specialists are given as endnotes.

VIDEOGRAPHY OF KATHAKALI

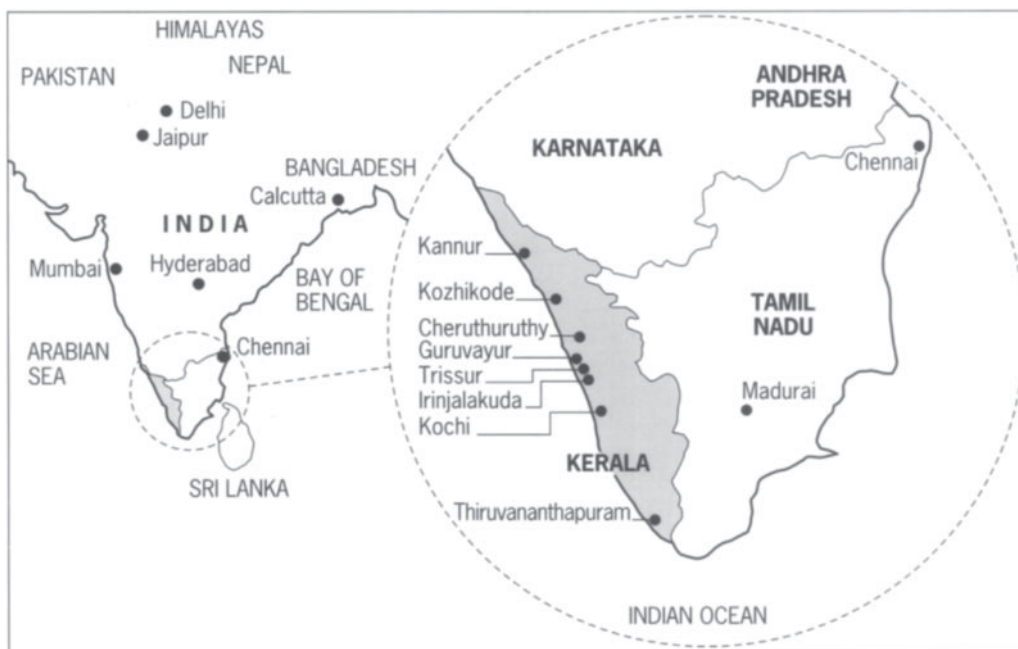
Since this book and its translations focus on *kathakali* in performance and context, it is accompanied by five videocassettes entitled an 'Introduction to *Kathakali* Dance-Drama,' and videodocuments of the four translated plays-in-performance. Taken together the translations, editorial notes, commentary, and videodocuments are intended to allow the reader to understand how an 'original' literary text is brought into performance today.

While working on this project in Kerala, India during 1993, J collaborated with the newly founded Centre for Documentation of Performing Arts in Killimangalam, Kerala and its organizers, Kunju Vasudevan Namboodiripad, Vasudevan Namboodiripad, M.P.Sankaran Namboodiri, and K.K.Gopalakrishnan. With the permission of all of *kathakali*'s senior artists, we documented as many well-known *kathakali* plays as we could fit into seven all-night performances staged both inside and outside the Killimangalam village temple. All the performances were attended by large and appreciative local audiences. It was an exciting and unprecedented documentation event which produced a collection of videos of the top artists in their best-known roles for use in translations such as these, for research, and for educating future generations of *kathakali* performers. The first night of actual documentation on 13 May, 1993, began with the official inauguration of the Killimangalam Centre for Documentation of the Performing Arts. Three of the plays translated here (*The Flower of Good Fortune*, *The Progeny of Krishna*, and *King Rugmamgada's Law*) were performed at Killimangalam between May and August 1993. The Centre for Documentation of the Performing Arts holds copyright on all videos made during this period of documentation.

The fourth play included here, *The Killing of Kirmira*, was recorded in 1996 at a staging organized by Drishyavedi in cooperation with the University of Wisconsin-Madison Kerala Summer Performing Arts Program. Like the performances at Killimangalam, this one was free, open to the public, and attended by a large and enthusiastic audience at Tirtapatta Mandapam located at East Fort in the heart of 'old' Thiruvananthapuram near the main temple. Complete information on the availability of the videos, including a list of artists involved, is included in the Appendix.

Figure 0.1 *Location of Kerala within India*

Cheruthuruthy is the home of the Kerala Kalamandalam. Guruvayur is where Krishnattam is performed. Irinjalakuda is home to both *kathakali* and *kutiyattam*. Kochi is the major port city where 'tourist' *kathakali* is regularly performed. Thiruvananthapuram is the capital city where Margi is located.



acknowledgments



Beginning with my first trip to Kerala in 1976–77, *kathakali* actor-dancer M.P.Sankaran Namboodiri (former Principal, Kerala Kalamandalam), and scholar/critic/connoisseur Vasudevan Namboodiripad (former Superintendent, Kerala Kalamandalam) have provided constant inspiration and guidance for me as I studied/sweated, enjoyed, and learned to appreciate *kathakali*. In 1993 I also began working with Professor Prabodhachandran Nayar of the University of Kerala, and we were able to spend countless hours together working on translations, talking about the pleasures of *kathakali*, and watching favorite performances. I owe these three individuals in particular a great deal for the little I am able to say about *kathakali*.

I thank the Kerala Kalamandalam teachers and administrative staff for welcoming and assisting me over the years of my research, and for offering institutional affiliation in 1976–77, 1993, and 1996. I also wish to thank Margi—a remarkable private cultural organization in Thiruvananthapuram responsible for a revival of training and interest in the traditional arts in southern Kerala, especially *kathakali*, *kutiyattam*, and *namgyar kuttu*. In particular, I want to acknowledge the late D. Appakoothan Nair for the precious time we spent together, and for his keen and incisive intellect. Although we often disagreed, it was always a disagreement with space for listening and friendly arguments. The current treasurer of Margi, Rama Iyer, and all its

members and artists deserve my continuing thanks for welcoming me over the years to their homes and performances. Ganesha Iyer’s wisdom, memory, and insights have been shared with grace and charm.

During 1993, Kunju Vasudevan Namboodiripad, along with all his family, provided the logistical and organizational support to undertake video and photographic documentation of a number of all-night performances—all of which were sponsored by the Centre for Documentation of the Performing Arts, Killimangalam, Trissur District, Kerala. To Kunju, Vasudevan, Vimala, and their entire extended family, many thanks for all their efforts in bringing together the most senior artists to document their performances for the future education of *kathakali* actor-dancers and appreciators. And thanks to all the artists who agreed to have their performances documented for the Centre, including among many others Kalamandalam Gopi Asan, Ramankutty Nayar Asan, Padmanabhan Nayar Asan, and Kummaran Nayar Asan.

Thanks also to the leadership and members of Drishyavedi, another important cultural organization in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, which organized *kathakali* performances for the University of Wisconsin-Madison Summer Performing Arts Program in 1993 and 1996, and which were also documented for this project.

I also wish to express my thanks to Annette

Leday, David McRuvie, and Iyyamkode Sreedharan for opening their rehearsals to me, and for the hours we spent talking about their work. They have been more than generous.

K.K.Gopalakrishnan and Sharon Grady offered their advice, support, assistance, as well as still photographs taken at all the performances commissioned in 1993. During 1993, Dr Jose George did yeoman service by assisting me with translation. I thank him for his company, patience, and keen insights into Kerala culture.

Some of the chapters in this book are revisions of previously published essays, or chapters in books. Part of Chapter 2 was originally published as 'A Tradition of Change: The Role of Patrons and Patronage in the *Kathakali* Dance-drama' in *Arts Patronage in India: Methods, Motives, and Markets*, edited by Joan Erdman (1992). Parts of Chapters 3 and 4 are a revision of several chapters from *The Kathakali Complex*. The commentary on *The Progeny of Krishna* in Chapter 7 was first published as 'An Ocean of Possibilities: From *Lokadharmi* to *Natyadharmi* in a *Kathakali Santanagopalam*' in *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 28, 1, 1994, and is published with the permission of the editors of *Comparative Drama*. Part of Chapter 4 was originally written for publication in *By Means of Performance*, and published in 1990. Part of the commentaries in Chapters 6 and 8 were originally published in *When the Body Becomes All Eyes...* and are published with the permission of Oxford University Press. Chapter 9 originally appeared in *Critical Theory and Performance*, edited by Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach, and is

published with the permission of the University of Michigan Press. Chapter 10 originally appeared as 'Contested Narratives on and off the *Kathakali* Dance-Drama Stage' in *Modern Drama* (35, 1992), and is published with the permission of the University of Toronto Press.

A number of colleagues have commented on my work over the years and offered very helpful constructive criticism. Among them I wish to thank in particular Professor Joan Erdman (Columbia College and the University of Chicago), Professor Peter Claus (California State University-Hayward), and Professors V.Narayana Rao, David Knipe, and Kirin Narayan at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

I want to acknowledge with great thanks, several grants which provided opportunities to work on parts of this manuscript. During 1993 I was in Kerala for seven months on a Guggenheim Fellowship, a senior Fulbright research fellowship, and with supplemental support from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 1995 I was able to work on the final draft of translations of the three plays through the support of the Asian Cultural Council. And in 1996 I was able to spend two months in Kerala revising the final manuscript with a short-term senior research fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies.

I would especially like to thank Talia Rodgers at Routledge Press for her patience and confidence through the writing and editorial process, and Deborah Procter for her critical reading of much of the final draft.



an ‘ocean of possibilities’

Kathakali dance-drama is
like a vast and deep
ocean. Some may come
to a performance with
their hands cupped and
only be able to take away
what doesn’t slip through

their fingers. Others may
come with a small vessel,
and be able to drink that:
And still others may
come with a huge cook-
ing pot and take away so
much more!

KATHAKALI AND ITS MANY AUDIENCES

My paraphrase of this highly reflective story about *kathakali* and its relationship to its audiences was told to me during my 1993 trip to Kerala, India, by my friend and colleague, V.R. Prabodhachandran Nayar—a life-long appreciator of *kathakali* and Professor of Linguistics at the University of Kerala. Sitting on the veranda of his wife’s family home on a quiet back street in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala, he told me this story as we continued our work of translating *The Progeny of Krishna* (*Santanagopalam*)—a *kathakali* play text (*attakatha*, literally, ‘enacted story’) authored by Mandavappalli Ittiraricha Menon (c. 1747–94).

I had selected *The Progeny of Krishna* as the first play for us to translate for all the ‘wrong’ literary reasons. As Prabodhachandran Nayar explained when wearing his dual hats of linguist and appreciator of good Sanskrit and Malayalam poetry, *The Progeny of Krishna* simply ‘isn’t great poetry. There’s too much repetition, and the vocabulary is meagre. It’s just not rich!’ In fact, such ‘bad’ poetry was *The Progeny of Krishna* that Prabodhachandran Nayar had never read a printed version of the text before I convinced him to read it with me. As a text on the page, *The Progeny of Krishna* simply cannot compare to the poetic rich-

ness and beauty of the four formative *kathakali* texts (*Bakavadham*, *Kirmiravadham*, *Kalyanasaugandhikam*, and *Kalakeyavadham*) by Kottayam Tampuran (c. 1645–1716), or Unnayi Variyar’s (c.1675–1716) much heralded four-part version of the Nala/Damayanti story. Variyar’s *Nalacaritam* in particular has been singled out as ‘the highest peak in *kathakali* literature’ (George 1968:102),¹ and therefore, along with the Kottayam plays, finds its way into the required syllabi of Malayalam literature courses and/or critical editions and commentaries.

Although Prabodhachandran Nayar had never read the text of *The Progeny of Krishna* before, he knew the text-in-performance by heart and, like some other life-long appreciators among a Malayali audience, might be heard humming the well-loved if simple language beautifully set to appropriate musical modes (*ragas*). Quite simply, even if he did not think much of the poetry of the play, he loved attending a good performance. Moreover, he cherished a life-long set of memories of *The Progeny of Krishna* in performance—from those sponsored in family house compounds or local temples as an auspicious act by childless couples hoping to secure future progeny, to performances of the renowned actor-dancer Krishnan Nayar, whose genius left its stamp, along with Kunju Nayar, on contemporary interpretations and conventions for acting the main role of the Brahmin.²

What struck me most about the performances of *The Progeny of Krishna* that I saw at village temples during 1993 were the many levels of appreciation and pleasure available to audiences attending this ‘vast and deep ocean’ of performance. Those who showed up with their ‘huge cooking pots’ were like 78-year-old Ganesha Iyer—life-long connoisseurs educated by years of attendance to respond with appreciation and/or criticism to the nuances and virtuosity of each performance. As Ganesha Iyer explained to me:

From six years of age I was taken to see *kathakali* performances by my father and older brothers. I’ve read all the plays, can appreciate performances, and point out all the defects! But real appreciation requires critical study and drawing on knowledge of actors and other experts.

Traditionally known as being ‘*kathakali* mad,’ connoisseurs like Ganesha Iyer used to travel far and wide during the ‘season’ from January through April/May to attend as many performances as possible by their favorite actor-dancers. The ideal connoisseur is knowledgeable in Sanskrit, enculturated into the finest nuances of each poetic text, and able to appreciate and criticize each performer’s style and approach to performing particular roles. Today he is known as a *rasika* (‘taster of *rasa*’) or *sahridaya*—one whose heart/mind (*hrdaya*) is so attuned and able to respond intuitively to a performance that he is able to ‘take away so much.’

But also in attendance were children and the child-like—those with little to no education in *kathakali*’s nuances—who came with ‘cupped hands’ only able to drink what did not ‘slip through their fingers’ or could be held in their ‘small vessels.’ This drama’s pleasures included:

- 1 interest in the story and its drama of a couple’s love and loss of their children;
- 2 empathy for the main character of the Brahmin;
- 3 enjoyment of the beautiful musical modes to which the text is sung;
- 4 raucous laughter at the Brahmin’s all too human foibles;
- 5 a sense of devotion (*bhakti*) for Krishna;
- 6 a sense of affirmation that human suffering is subsumed within the workings of lord Vishnu’s cosmic ‘play.’

Although from a literary point of view *The Progeny of Krishna* was the ‘wrong’ play to translate, from a folkloristic point of view foregrounding performance context and effect,³ *The Progeny of Krishna* was a good candidate for translation because its pleasures are accessible and popular.

Another good candidate would have been the very popular play *The Killing of Duryodhana* (*Duryodhanavadham*) by Vayaskara Aryan Narayanan Moosad (1841–1902). This enacts that part of the Mahabharata in which the Pandavas achieve victory over their cousins, the Kauravas, when their leader, Duryodhana, is killed on the great Kurukshetra battlefield. In a discussion, Prabodhachandran Nayar vividly recalled the response two popular scenes used to elicit from their audiences. In the scene at court, the Pandavas seek to defuse the impending crisis, which will lead to a division of their property, by making an increasingly meagre set of requests of Duryodhana. The first request is for him just to give them ‘five villages’ to rule. Duryodhana refuses with a simple ‘no.’ The second request is for ‘five houses’ to which he again responds ‘no.’ And the final request is for only ‘one house’ to which he also responds ‘no.’ At this moment during some performances in the past, a member of the audience occasionally stood up to proclaim, ‘Then I will give!’

A second example of commonplace audience-performer interaction which Prabodhachandran Nayar recalls is the electrifying scene of banishment at Duryodhana’s court, especially when the title role of Duryodhana was played by the once popular southern actor Mankulham Vishnu Namboodiri. As the scene opens, the hand-held curtain is lowered to reveal Duryodhana at his court accompanied by his family and counselors—his brother Dussassana, as well as the strong Karna and wise Bhishma. He announces that Krishna will soon arrive, but that absolutely no one at court should show Krishna any respect at all.

When Mankulham Vishnu Namboodiri acted the role of Duryodhana, he used to make the audience part of the play! He’d just told no one in the court to stand when Krishna arrived. And then, when Krishna comes onto the stage, many in the audience would stand!

During the run-up to Indian Independence in 1947 and immediately after, for those in the audience active in the nationalist movement, this simple act of defiance to the authority represented by Duryodhana symbolized their resistance to British colonial rule.

In a separate discussion of this play's popularity, life-long connoisseur G.S. Warriar recalled another resonance that made *The Killing of Duryodhana* so popular in the 1930s and 1940s:

Among Nayars...the request to 'give a portion of the kingdom' was precisely the situation they faced at the time since Nayar extended families were deciding whether and how to divide their property!

Warriar's reference is to the effect that changing socio-economic conditions and colonial legislation about marriage and property rights were having on large, matrilineal Nayar families. Before the development of a marketplace economy, these families lived on commonly owned property under the leadership of the eldest male. Changes in marriage and inheritance patterns were causing these families to divide their 'kingdoms' (householding) into ever smaller parcels.

Unfortunately, descriptions of such immediate responses and popular pleasures that make *kathakali* such a 'vast and deep ocean' for its indigenous audiences have often been missing from accounts of *kathakali*, including my own, which have problematically represented *kathakali* either as a 'classical' performing art or as an art exclusively intended for its patron-connoisseurs.⁴ *Where Gods and Demons Come to Play* is intended to reveal some of *kathakali*'s numerous pleasures and 'attractions.' As Prabodhachandran Nayar comments:

At old feasts there were always supposed to be sixty-four items served with rice. *Kathakali* is like that—it's got sixty-four attractions. If you like one thing, you can fix your attention on that!

THE HISTORY OF KATHAKALI IN KERALA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

At the historical moment of its emergence as a distinct genre of performance in the late sixteenth

and early seventeenth centuries, *kathakali* was given its present name, which literally means 'story play' and refers to the performance of dramas written by playwright-composers in highly Sanskritized Malayalam. Like most traditional modes of storytelling and performance in India, *kathakali* plays enact one or more episodes from regional versions of the pan-Indian religious epics (*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*) and *puranas*, the 'bibles of popular Hinduism' (De Bary 1958:23).⁵ In *The God of Small Things*, Kerala-born contemporary novelist Arundhati Roy describes in vivid prose the 'secret' of these 'Great Stories' adapted for *kathakali* performance, and their popular appeal:

the secret of the Great Stories is that they *have* no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover's skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won't. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again. *That* is their mystery and their magic.

(1997:229)

As discussed in detail in Chapter 2, *kathakali* was given birth, nurtured, patronized, and increasingly refined by its traditional patrons—those 'non-polluting' high-caste ruling and/or landholding extended families, especially titled royal lineages of Nayars (Samantans) and the highest ranking Namboodiri brahmins. These castes were most directly charged with and invested in the sensibilities and socio-political order reflected in the epic and puranic literatures enacted on the *kathakali* stage.

By the end of the eighteenth century, most of the distinctive performance techniques and conventions that still characterize *kathakali* as a regional genre of performance had evolved. On a bare outdoor stage cleared of underbrush and defined only by a temporary canopy of four poles with cloth

hung overhead, using only a few stools and properties, three groups of performers collectively create *kathakali* performances: actor-dancers, percussionists, and vocalists. Traditionally an all-male⁶ company of actor-dancers drawn originally from the ranks of martial practitioners pledged to death in service to their patron-rulers, the performers use a highly physical style of performance embodied through years of training to play its many and varied roles. Each role is easily identifiable to many in a Malayali audience since each character type has its own distinctive make-up, elaborate costume, and characteristic behavior. The actor-dancers create their roles by using a repertory of dance steps, choreographed patterns of stage movement, an intricate and complex language of hand gestures (*mudras*) for literally 'speaking' their character's dialogue with their hands, and a pliable use of the face and eyes to express the internal states (*bhava*) of each character. The percussion orchestra consists of three types of drums (*centa*, *maddalam*, and *itekka*) each with its own distinctive sound and role in the ensemble, and brass cymbals which maintain the basic rhythmic cycles around which the dance-drama is structured. The two on-stage vocalists play the basic time patterns on their cymbals and sing the entire text, including both third person narration and first person dialogue, in a vocal style characterized by elaboration and repetition.

A *kathakali* performance traditionally served as a pleasurable form of education into these well-known stories and their implicit values and meanings. As Wendy O'Flaherty argues

Myths are not written by gods and demons, nor for them; they are by, for, and about men. Gods and demons serve as metaphors for human situations... Myth is a two-way mirror in which ritual and philosophy may regard one another. It is the moment when people normally caught up in everyday banalities are suddenly (perhaps because of some personal upheaval) confronted with problems that they have hitherto left to the bickerings of the philosophers; and it is the moment when philosophers, too, come to terms with the darker, flesh-and-blood aspects of their abstract inquiries.

(1976:8–9)

One of the major 'macrostructural narratives'⁷ that informs *kathakali*'s staging of these mythic stories is the notion of 'divine play' (*lila*). Norvin Hein explains the theological significance of this central notion of 'play' in Hindu thought:

[*Lila*...is] the central term in the Hindu elaboration of the idea that God in his creating and governing world is moved not by need or necessity but by a free and joyous creativity that is integral to his own nature. He acts in a state of rapt absorption comparable to that of an artist possessed by his creative vision or that of a child caught up in the delight of a game played for its own sake.

(in Sax 1995:13)

In addition to God's creative dimension, *lila* also refers to the various forms or incarnations the divine takes 'in order to sustain and protect the world; thus, the *lilas* of such deities as Rama and especially as Krishna are the subject of much devotional art and literature' which have been adapted and 'elaborated by various Indian religious traditions' including Vaishnava, Saiva, and Sakta (Sax 1995:4).

In Kerala, the Krishna cult and the fundamental theological concept of *lila* grew in importance between the sixth and ninth centuries as part of the Alvar devotional (*bhakti*) movement throughout Tamil country. Spurred on by such early devotional works as the Malabar (Kerala) King Kulashekhara's collection of hymns (*Mukunda Mala*), by the twelfth century the movement was enconsecrated in Kerala's Vaishnavite temples, where Jayadeva's popular Sanskrit work *GitaGovinda* was introduced. It was sung and danced to allow an audience to enter a devotional as well as aesthetic experience of the amorous 'sport' (*lila*) of Krishna's love-play with Radha (Varadpande 1982:87ff.). In 1650 the deep devotionism of Jayadeva's original work inspired the ruler of Kozhikode, Manaveda, to compose and stage a cycle of eight dance-dramas (*Krishnagiti*) in Sanskrit and based, like the *GitaGovinda*, on the life of Krishna. The genre eventually became known as *Krishnattam* (Krishna's dance) and was performed only within the confines of the Guruvayur temple as an offering to the primary deity, Lord Krishna. The eight dramatic episodes are traditionally performed on

eight consecutive nights, beginning with the birth of Krishna, continuing through Krishna's absorption into his divine form (Mahavishnu), and concluding on the ninth night with the repetition of the drama of Krishna's birth, symbolizing and actualizing for devotees Krishna's eternal presence.

Unlike *Krishnattam*, which restricted itself to performances of Manaveda's eight plays enacting the life and grace of Krishna, when *kathakali* was given birth it drew on a wide range of epic and *puranic* sources. The serious 'sport' of all the gods and their agents became the cosmic backdrop against which traditional *kathakali* performances are staged. *Kathakali*'s temporarily sanctified theatre space is visited by a colorful array of epic and *puranic* players from demons, demonesses, and demon-kings to epic heroes and heroines, priests and brahmins, and even the gods themselves (Agni, Indra, Siva, Vishnu, etc.). There are also the agents of the gods such as Sudarsana Cakra (Vishnu/Krishna's divine weapon, appearing in *The Killing of Kirmira* and *The Progeny of Krishna*), Chitrugupta (agent of Yama, the god of death, appearing in *The Progeny of Krishna*), or Nandikeswara (the gatekeeper of Siva's abode). All these characters are festooned in (more or less) larger-than-life costumes, head-dresses, and symbolic full-face make-up as they enact these cosmic scripts.

Always implicit, this notion of divine play is occasionally explicit, as in *Kiratham* by Irrattakulangara Rama Varier (1801–45). *Kiratham* enacts that part of the Mahabharata in which the epic hero, Arjuna, goes to the Himalayas to perform penance to lord Siva as he seeks to secure from him the divine *pasupata* weapon needed to help the princely Pandavas in their forthcoming battle with the Kauravas. After Arjuna's journey to the Himalayas, he performs a series of austere meditations (*tapas*). Although Siva is pleased with Arjuna, he wants to test him. He disguises himself as a Hunter (Kirata) and engages Arjuna in a dispute of wills and arms over which of them killed a wild boar. Arjuna is gradually stripped of all his weapons and subdued by Siva-in-disguise. Recovering from his defeat, Arjuna returns to his austerities, realizing that the Hunter was Siva-in-disguise. Asking Siva's forgiveness, Arjuna is blessed by Siva and his wife, Parvati, and given the divine weapon. This and other tests are instigated by the gods as part of their cosmic 'play.' As Arjuna sings of Siva in *Kiratham*,

'By means of your "play," you protect the whole universe!'

As in *Kiratham*, this cosmic script is sometimes enacted by the gods themselves when they come to the stage to return cosmic 'law' to its rightful order. This is the case in both *The Progeny of Krishna* and *King Rugmamgada's Law* where it is lord Vishnu himself who intercedes at the end of each play to set 'right' an imbalance created by his own divine 'sport.' But more often than the gods themselves, it is their heroic agents such as Arjuna, Bhima and Rama, who are called upon to set things 'right.' Among the many manifestations of this cosmic play are the *kathakali* dance-dramas with 'killing' (*vadham*) in their titles such as *The Killing of Kirmira* (*Kirmiravadham*), *The Killing of Duryodhana* and *The Killing of Narakasura*. It is traditionally at dawn at the end of an all-night performance that the act of killing a demon such as Kirmira, an anti-hero like Duryodhana, or a demon-king such as Narakasura in a one-on-one combat concludes these cosmic dramas.⁸ Even in plays without 'killing' in their titles⁹ some killing still takes place. For example, in the full-length version of *The Flower of Good Fortune* the heroic Bhima encounters two demons on his journey. In order to accomplish his mission of collecting the 'flowers of good fortune,' he first dispatches Jatasura, and in the penultimate scene he kills Krodhavaśa. As David R. Kinsley persuasively argues, when faced with combat 'one gets the impression that the gods are really never in trouble at all, that they condescend to battle the demons simply because it is part of some cosmic script or because they enjoy it' (1979:49).

Another major 'macrostructural narrative' implicit in these ubiquitous 'killings' in *kathakali* is the royal obligation of the South Asian king to conduct warfare. In India, kingship has long been understood to play an essential role in the maintenance of political and cosmic order. In spite of the fact that the 565 kingdoms or 'princely states' that existed in India at the time of Independence in 1947 disappeared within a year or two of that date, as Chris Fuller asserts, kingship has retained

a central importance in Hinduism and Indian society. In the traditional Hindu worldview, as expounded most clearly in textual sources, kingship is seen as a vital institution; a society without a king is unviable and anarchic... [A]ll

sources agree that the king's first responsibility is to protect his kingdom and subjects, by guaranteeing their safety, prosperity, and well-being... [T]he order of the kingdom is itself part of the sociocosmic order or *dharma*, and it is ultimately preserved by king and deity together, rather than the king alone.¹⁰

(1992:106)

One of the major duties of the king was to conduct warfare, which, as Chris Fuller has convincingly argued, 'is a reiteration of the idea that an ordered cosmos is created by sacrificial destruction' (1992:124–5). In medieval Kerala with its fragmentary, segmented state structure, battle was a 'dominant metaphor for conceptualizing relations of spiritual and socio-political power' (Freeman 1991:588). The royal obligation to sacrifice oneself on the battlefield and to at least attempt to symbolically expand one's kingdom led to an almost constant state of warfare between and among its petty rulers (see Zarrilli 1998: Chapter 2). As we shall see in several of the plays translated in this book, this royal obligation to conduct warfare as an act of sacrificial destruction is reflected in the concerns and actions of *kathakali*'s epic heroes. As represented in most *kathakali* plays, the 'heroic' is an idealized state of being/doing dramatically marked by the necessity of the hero's sacrificial acts of blood-letting, usually accomplished by the end of the performance when he 'kills' one or other demon or demon-king. As detailed in Chapter 2, and several of the commentaries in Chapters 5–8, the concerns, trials, and tribulations of *kathakali*'s epic heroes can be read as reflecting the concerns and problems of its traditional patrons—those charged with upholding the 'kingdom.'

By the time *kathakali* crystallized its basic performance structure and techniques at the end of the eighteenth century, its all-night performances of 30- to 40-page texts had become one of the most popular forms of entertainment. Performances took place at least seasonally if not more frequently sponsored by royal households, by wealthy landholding families in celebration of a wedding or a birth, and/or as part of annual temple festivals. *Kathakali*'s popularity derived not only from its enactment of familiar stories in the local language of Malayalam (although still heavily Sanskritized) with its recog-

nizable cast of characters, but also from its accessibility to large audiences when performed as a regular part of annual Hindu temple festivals. G.S. Warriar described for me his memories of attending *kathakali* during his childhood:

From the tender age of six or seven, I saw *kathakali*. The temple across the road had a ten-day festival, and on four of those days there were *kathakali*. There was also a Krishna temple within fifteen miles of my village, and it was a real center for *kathakali*. The Ambalapuzha Raja was there, and they had a *kathakali* yogam (company) for training. In those days there used to be crowds of 3,000 to 4,000 at a performance! So we learned to appreciate that way.¹¹

Since Kerala's largest high-caste temples limited entry to only the 'non-polluting' castes, Kerala's mode of enacting Sanskrit dramas (*kutiyattam*), and *kathakali*'s immediate precursor, *Krishnattam*, were only seen by the gods, for whom they were performed as visual sacrifices/offerings, and by the high castes. In contrast, *kathakali* has, with a few exceptions, always been performed *outside* the walls of temples, or in palace or family house compounds. Consequently, it was accessible to many more, if not 'all', people.

Accessibility is relative and context specific. Although *kathakali*'s performances outside the temples were theoretically 'accessible,' 'all' were not welcome and would not have felt welcome, especially in the front rows where high caste connoisseurs sit, men to the right and women to the left. As Robin Jeffrey explains,

Old Kerala was a place of boundaries and constraints—boundaries on where particular people might go; constraints on what they might do. People lived in discrete groups which connected with others in regulated, symbolic ways.

(1992:19)

Some of the most obvious and restrictive constraints were those placed on mingling of genders and castes. Substantive/pollution-based notions of caste were based on the concept that an individual born into a particular caste possessed, by virtue of one's birth, a more or less polluting 'substance.' Exchanges of food and/or bodily based fluids,

and the amount of distance that needed to be maintained between individuals of differing castes/substances were therefore defined and restricted by one's birth into a particular caste. These notions lingered into the early twentieth century.

[A]t the base of these many little pyramids [of caste], families of slave castes, usually Pulayas or Parayas, did the heavy work of paddy cultivation and were treated virtually as beasts... In the eighteenth century, Pulayas who polluted their superiors might be killed, and as late as 1904, a Nayar was reported to have killed a Pulaya with a spade after the Pulaya had approached and 'polluted' him. All groups ruthlessly preserved ritual purity.

(Jeffrey 1992:20)

Given the strict rules of distance pollution and bans against intermingling, exchange and cooking of food, and touch, we can be sure that audiences at *kathakali* performances taking place at temples or in family house compounds were governed and constrained by these rules and conventions, and did not mix across either boundaries of gender or the caste-based line of 'pollution.'¹²

Although the largest number of *kathakali* performances today continue to be organized as part of temple festivals during the dry festival season from mid-December through May, the large and enthusiastic audiences it once attracted are becoming the exception rather than the rule. One such exception is the annual Vishwambhara Krishna Temple festival performances during March-April in Kottakkal. Kottakkal is well known to *kathakali* lovers because a *kathakali* troupe and training institution has been patronized there since 1939 when the P.S.V. Natyasangham was established by Vaidyaratnam P.S. Varier—visionary philanthropist, artist, physician, businessman, and founder of one of the largest and best known Ayurvedic medical factories and clinics in India, the Kottakkal Ayurveda Sala. Like other years, when I was there in 1993 the week-long March festival boasted all-night performances every evening, featuring all the top *kathakali* 'stars', such as Gopi Asan in the title role of Karna in *Karnasapatham* (playing opposite the ageing but still popular Kottakkal Sivaraman in the role of his mother, Kunti); Padmanabhan

Asan in the role of Ravana in *Balivijayan*. Each evening connoisseurs arrived early to get a seat on the ground just in front of the stage, to have the best view of the nuances of the performances to follow, and an eager and enthusiastic audience of well over 2,000 gradually filled and overflowed the cleared performance area immediately outside the temple compound. Many if not all of the audience stayed until dawn.

In contrast are the ever-diminishing audiences at temple festivals lesser known for sponsorship of *kathakali* and where no 'stars' are playing. At several performances I attended in 1993, such as one at the Narasimha Temple near Kottayam, by midnight as few as twenty people remained in the audience, and only a handful among them were attentive to the performance.

In addition to temple sponsorship, *kathakali* is performed monthly in a few of Kerala's major towns and cities under the sponsorship of cultural organizations such as the Trissur Kathakali Club in central Kerala, the Trivandrum Kathakali Club, Drishyavedi, and Margi in the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram.¹³ These and other private cultural organizations began to be founded in the 1960s by groups of civic-minded connoisseurs of the traditional arts to fill what was perceived as a vacuum in the regular public presentation of Kerala performing arts, especially *kathakali*. Most performances sponsored by *kathakali* clubs and cultural organizations are given in large, proscenium-style regional theatres and are attended by fifty to several hundred paying spectators—primarily *kathakali* aficionados who attend monthly to see their favorite performers in particular roles.

KATHAKALI AS CONTESTED TERRITORY

Although *kathakali* continues to hold many different pleasures and is appreciated in many different ways by its audiences in Kerala, it is one form of cultural practice which, like other modes of expressive culture, is increasingly contested territory today. One arena of contestation is simply for the attention of the Malayali public. In 1993, I was waiting for the 'Parasuram Express' to the capital (Thiruvananthapuram) at the Shoranur Junction railway station near Cheruthuruthy, where the

internationally-known Kerala State Arts School (Kerala Kalamandalam) is located, when a well-dressed 21-year-old college student of computer science, Mohan, approached me and started a conversation in English. It was raining heavily—typical during the south-west monsoon which begins every June and lasts until August. Mohan asked what I was doing in Kerala. I explained I had been coming to Kerala for twenty years, and that I was conducting research and writing on *kathakali* dance-drama.

Surprised, Mohan asked, ‘are people in the United States really interested in this art?’ I explained that although very few people knew about *kathakali*, those interested in non-Western theatre and dance wanted to know more. I asked if he was interested in *kathakali*. Mohan smiled ironically,

Oh, no, I’m not interested in *kathakali* at all. Most people my age aren’t interested at all. We’d rather go to films or watch television.

I asked if anyone in his family attended *kathakali* performances. He proudly explained that his father had never been interested in *kathakali* and therefore never went. Almost apologetically, Mohan added:

My mother was raised in a [relatively high-caste] family that enjoys *kathakali* and attends performances whenever she comes here [to her family home] with my uncle and aunt, as well as my cousin who is my age. They all love *kathakali* and go to performances often.

Today *kathakali* dance-drama must compete for the attention and imagination of young Malayalis like Mohan and his cousin with an increasingly diverse set of enticing entertainments—from the numerous popular films churned out by the massive Indian/Malayalam film industries, to the flood of Western films (everything from Stallone action films to X-rated movies), to television (introduced to Kerala in 1983), to a variety of new popular entertainments from modern drama to ‘mimics parade’—solo stand-up routines in which young men enact phenomenally accurate impressions of everything from animals to popular singers, cinema stars, or political personalities. Unlike Mohan’s cousin, who is being ‘educated’ by his

family into appreciation of *kathakali*, an increasing number of young people from families that would traditionally have been likely to attend and appreciate *kathakali*, like Mohan, seldom if ever attend *kathakali* today. As Prabodhachandran Nayar commented in a discussion:

The trend [toward featuring popular performances] has resulted in totally forgetting the gods at many temple festivals by replacing *kathakali* with dramas, mimic shows, etc. The divine may still be there, but increasingly it is being buried under more and more layers. Temple festivals used to be measured by the number of nights on which *kathakali* was being performed!

In the late twentieth century, *kathakali*’s existence has become part of what South Asian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and historian, Carol Breckenridge call ‘public culture’:

a zone of cultural debate...characterized as an arena where other types, forms, and domains of culture are encountering, interrogating and contesting each other in new and unexpected ways.

(1988:6)

As a genre, *kathakali* is increasingly open to a variety of modes of contestation over everything from its potential audiences to its content and representations, performance techniques, modes of appreciation and reception, or performance contexts both in Kerala and abroad. Mohan and his cousin experience the type of social and personal ‘realities’ described by ethnographic historian James Clifford:

the world’s societies are too systematically interconnected to permit any easy isolation of separate or independently functioning systems... Twentieth century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performance from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols, and languages.

(1988:230)

Consequently, the public culture terrain which *kathakali* inhabits in the late twentieth century is

contested by an increasingly diverse group of 'producers of culture and their audiences' (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988:6–7) who make use of quite different discursive and critical narratives in shaping their versions of *kathakali*. This is as true of 'learned' discourses about *kathakali* such as this one, as of the more 'local' world *kathakali* artists and connoisseurs inhabit in Kerala, where the discourses of elite scholars of cultural studies and history around issues of gender, class, race, and identity are only beginning to circulate and make their impact felt.

Inhabiting a 'world dominated by the media, by consumption, and by global cultural flows' (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995:3), *kathakali* is constantly being (re)created and (re)positioned by and/or for its many different actor-dancers, critics, scholars, sponsors, audiences, administrators, as well as politicians, thereby making available an increasingly heteronomous set of images, discourses, experiences, structures, knowledges, and meanings for them all. Some of these constantly shifting (re)positionings have been an inevitable and often violent result of socio-economic and/or political reforms resulting from British colonial rule, while others are arguably less 'benign.'

As discussed in Chapter 2, perhaps the most abrupt and radical historical shift in the history of *kathakali* has been the loss of traditional patronage resulting from rapidly changing socio-economic circumstances brought by continuing British colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. New institutional structures for the support of *kathakali* were necessarily established in 1930 when the well-loved contemporary Malayali poet Mahakavi Vallathol Narayana Menon founded the now internationally known Kerala State School of the Arts, Kerala Kalamandalam, in order to ensure that future generations of performers would receive training under the best master teachers. Institutions like the Kalamandalam have had to develop new ways of organizing training which combine indigenous models with Western colonial ones. These changes have inevitably influenced all aspects of *kathakali*.

Just as *kathakali* patronage and institutional structures have shifted and changed *kathakali*, it has adapted in a variety of ways to suit the changing concerns, needs, and tastes of its traditional high-caste audience of connoisseurs, including:

- 1 editing all-night plays-in-performance into three-hour cameos for its 'stars' so that either one play is performed in an evening program ending at 9:30p.m., or three edited plays are performed in an all-night program;
- 2 writing and staging new plays based on traditional epic/puranic sources, and in the process occasionally creating new (epic) characters based more on everyday life than most roles in the repertory;
- 3 restaging long 'lost' scenes of plays still in the repertory in order to restore the 'original,' and/or reviving plays no longer in the repertory;
- 4 considerably expanding existing scenes to suit an aesthetic defined as a 'non-worldly' 'theatre of the mind' performed primarily if not exclusively for an audience of connoisseurs.

As we shall see in Chapters 2 and 3, even though some of these changes have radically altered how a full-length *kathakali* play was performed in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, they are not usually perceived as negative, but as acceptable changes legitimized from 'within' the tradition. These changes test but do not break the 'rules.' The relative 'success' or 'failure' of such changes are debated by connoisseurs and critics in terms of the degree of 'appropriateness' of content, music, technique, and acting. As we shall see in the commentary in Chapter 6, some forms of change are represented by their champions as 'improving' *kathakali*'s aesthetic and therefore are naturalized as positive.

In contrast are changes and 'experiments' in content and technique discussed in Chapters 9 and 10—the highly controversial productions of *Kathakali King Lear* performed in 1989–90 for audiences on the international festival circuit, or the 1987 production of *People's Victory* (*Manavavijayam*) performed primarily for non-traditional leftist audiences in Kerala. These productions are perceived by many connoisseurs as transgressing the limits of what they consider 'appropriate' to the 'tradition.' To dismiss such productions as unimportant for commentary or analysis, as do many connoisseurs, because they are not 'traditional,' would implicitly reify 'traditional' *kathakali* and its epic narratives as normative and uncontested, thereby failing to situate such experiments within the complex set of historical, socio-political,

cultural, discursive, and aesthetic forces at work in contemporary Kerala history. I agree with South Asian anthropologist and performance scholar Joan Erdman's observation that 'the use of performing arts for political and social messages and value transmission create questions for scholars which arise from the performers themselves' (1991:113, emphasis added). While still the exception rather than the rule, controversial *kathakali* productions like *Kathakali King Lear* and *People's Victory* invite performance scholars to address issues beyond the stereotypical aesthetic and genre questions often exclusively discussed in studies of Indian performance. They invite attention to the specific historical, socio-political, and contextual issues raised by all performances, whether considered 'controversial' or 'normative,' and also to the discursive and socio-cultural formation of what is or is not considered normative or contested.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Folklorist Richard Bauman noted long ago that traditions of performance (like *kathakali*) have always stood available to participants and spectators 'as a set of conventional expectations and associations' which can be 'manipulated in innovative ways, by fashioning novel performances outside the conventional system, or working various transformations and adaptations which turn performance into something else' (1977:34–5). As the above examples show, and as I hope to demonstrate in this book, a system of cultural performance such as Kerala's *kathakali* dance-drama is, like the concept of culture itself, not a set of fixed conventions and attributes but, rather, a dynamic system of human action constantly undergoing a process of negotiation.¹⁴ Critical theorist Susan Bennett expands this notion of the interactive state of flux and contestation in the relationship between 'culture' and performance when she writes that

both an audience's reaction to a text (or performance) and the text (performance) itself are bound within cultural limits. Yet, as diachronic analysis makes apparent, those limits are continually tested and invariably broken. Culture

cannot be held as a fixed entity, a set of constant rules, but instead it must be seen as in a position of inevitable flux.

(1990:101)

Based on extensive field research in Kerala between 1976 and the present, *When Gods and Demons Come to Play* is written as a performance ethnography of *kathakali* as one mode of cultural praxis through which knowledges, discourses, and meanings are repositioned through the practice of performance. I assume with performance scholar Margaret Drewal that both 'society and human beings are performative, always already processually under construction' (1991:4). Anthropologist Johannes Fabian similarly asserts that "performance" seem[s] to be a more adequate description both of the ways people realize their culture and of the method by which an ethnographer produces knowledge about that culture' (1990:18). I use the word 'performance' as the most appropriate metaphor for an epistemology which assumes that 'ethnography is essentially, not incidentally, communicative or dialogical; conversational, not observation' (Fabian 1990:4). Therefore, I include many different perspectives on *kathakali* from among its many producers, appreciators, and interpreters.

From this point of view, theater-making is a mode of socio-cultural practice. As such, it is not an innocent or naive activity separate from or above and beyond everyday reality, history, politics, or economics. As theatre historian Bruce McConachie asserts, 'theatre is not epiphenomenal, simply reflecting and expressing determinate realities and forces' (1989:230); rather, as a mode of socio-cultural practice, theatre is a complex network of specific, interactive *practices*—in *kathakali* these include the practices of authorship/composition, acting/performing, patronage/connoisseurship, construction/maintenance of the appurtenances of performance, and (more recently) management and even directing. McConachie suggests that an appropriate unit of analysis in theatre history is the 'theatrical formation,' that is, 'the mutual elaboration over time of historically-specific audience groups and theatre practitioners participating in certain shared patterns of action' (1989:232). Chapter 2 provides a social history of the 'theatrical formation' basic to

kathakali—the relationship between its patron/connoisseurs and performers.

Throughout the book, I (re)situate *kathakali* within the historical and socio-political particulars of each production/reception context so that the variety of subject positions from which interested discourses of theatrical practice, criticism, and reception are constructed can be identified, and the implicit ideologies of each position discussed. In this view, cultural performances are sites of cultural action which either implicitly assume, or explicitly assert, one or more discourses or meanings which can be propagated, contested, and/or protected as part of local, state, national, and/or geopolitical 'social dramas'.¹⁵ Performances of a play, the content of the drama/narrative, the genre of performance itself (*kathakali*), and/or the discursive and critical constructs through which the performance/drama/genre are discussed may become contested territory.

Although twentieth-century identities no longer necessarily presuppose continuous cultures or traditions, there are many contexts within which either 'the world' or at least some more framed and circumscribed arenas of experience are imagined and/or assumed to be continuous.¹⁶ This is especially the case in India generally and in the world of *kathakali* in particular, where, as we shall see (especially in Chapter 2), 'tradition' is often cast in the normative role of maintaining and authorizing a specific form of continuity with an imagined and/or 'authorized' past. As South Asian scholar A.K.Ramanujan has astutely observed, 'in a culture like the Indian, the past does not pass. It keeps on providing paradigms and ironies for the present, or at least that's the way it seems' (1989:133). Therefore, Parts I and II of this book provide an account of *kathakali*'s paradigmatic 'past'—that 'set of conventional expectations and associations' (Bauman 1977:34) or aesthetic 'rules' constantly (re)negotiated in the present. Part I, 'Performance in the Kerala Context' (Chapters 2–4), provides an overview of the socio-cultural history of *kathakali*, and an 'ideal-typical' account (Marglin 1985) of the dance-drama in performance—of its texts, repertory, performance conventions, techniques of training, and 'traditional' aesthetic. This account is in part an 'ideal-typical picture of the core...activities' (Marglin 1985), techniques, conventions, and assumptions or 'rules' which constitute *kathakali* in

many, but not all, 'traditional' contexts today. It is 'ideal-typical' in that it is the account of no single school or performer, but rather is constructed from fieldwork, observation, practice, and interviews with numerous performers and at numerous schools and institutions throughout Kerala solicited under my prompting as an 'outsider.' Given the processual view adopted here, cultural performances like *kathakali* are not reducible to their obvious set of performance techniques, repertory of play texts, 'traditional' set of conventions and/or aesthetics, etc. Rather, *kathakali* 'exists' as a set of potentialities inherent in the complex set of practices, texts, discourses, representations, and constraints through which it is constantly negotiated and (re)created by means of 'tactical improvisation' (Jenkins 1992:51), both within the 'tradition' and outside it.

Part II, 'Plays from the Traditional Repertory' (Chapters 5–8), provides for the first time in English a set of translations with commentaries of four plays-in-performance. Given the universal praise and respect among Malayalis for Unnayi Variyar's poetry in his four-part series of plays enacting the story of Nala and Damayanti (*Nalacaritam*, Parts 1–4 performed in four nights), the few translations which exist have understandably been of his plays.¹⁷ The first English version was V.Subramania Iyer's 1977 translation, which includes an introduction to *kathakali* texts (*attakatha*), notes on the author, plot summary and commentary, and the performance manual (*attaprakaram*) which actors use to guide them in performing the plays.¹⁸

Of the more than five hundred *kathakali* plays written, and of the approximately fifty authored by twenty major writers which still hold 'the stage with recognizable persistence' (Paniker 1993:21), I have selected four plays-in-performance for translation which, arguably, represent a diversity of characters, modes of staging, and range of moods and modes of aesthetic appreciation. The first two, *The Flower of Good Fortune* (*Kalyanasaugandhikam*) and *The Killing of Kirmira* (*Kirmiravadham*) were authored by Kottayam Tampuran (c. 1675–1725) and are two of his four formative 'Kottayam plays,' based on the Mahabharata, which gave *kathakali* its name—'story play.' After Variyar's *Nalacaritam*, the Kottayam plays are considered to have some of the best poetry in the *kathakali* repertory. Moreover, the four Kottayam plays are considered