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Variation and Interaction between Musical and Visual Components in a Kerala Ritual for Snake Deities

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The question of multisensoriality or interaction among senses, has been subject to many researches in anthropology and history (Corbin 1990, 1994, Howes 1990, 1991, Leavitt and Hart 1990). Ethnomusicology has favoured most of the time the unique dimension of hearing, underestimating the constructive role other senses - in particular visual - might play in musical performance. The domestic rituals I have observed in Kerala (South India) offer a challenging example of intersection between sound and visual idioms. Some specialists from low caste communities are using a transversal concept, the notion of "form", i.e., *rupam*, to describe composition process in music and graphic repertoire as well.

This paper focuses on a domestic ritual known as "*pambintullal*", literally "trembling of the snakes". This ritual is performed by a low status community, the Pulluvan, who is in charge of the cult of snake deities, *naga* or *sarppam*. These musicians work for upper castes families and provide several kinds of rituals and musical services in order to cure sins and to keep misfortune away. The aim of Pulluvan's activities consist in maintaining the fertility and the prosperity of the landowners through the worship of family snakes deities.

This ritual is also known as *kameluttu pattu'*, literally "song and writing of *kalam*". The *kalam* "area" or "space" is a drawing on the floor made of colours and powders. It represents the deities invoked in complex interlaces which are several metres large. Epicentre of the whole ritual action, it is used as a privileged means to call the deities or make them appear. It is erased after each night of ritual. This ephemeral drawing is always accompanied with music, both instrumental and vocal. The songs, *pattu'*, usually narrate the origins of the deities and their acts. They comment also upon the ritual actions which are performed simultaneously, for instance the details of offerings, prayers and the attitude of the audience.

Two media, visual and sound, form a very unique way of worship. The Pulluvan specialists are musicians and drawers as well. How to analyse the intertwining between music and drawing in this particular ritual?

The songs

The corpus consists of strophic songs with a fixed text. Musicians identify each song mainly by its text. Since, the tune and rhythm change from a performance to another. In Malayalam, the language of Kerala, the term *rupam* (form) denotes the tune. The way of rendering the text follows a single melodic line reiterated along the entire text. The rhythm consists of a cycle, *talam*, constant during the entire song.

The detailed analysis of the corpus reveals that each musician has his own way to render a same text. I have identified ten rhythmic cycles and about twenty melodic profiles, the two main stocks in which the musician draws from. At each performance, the singer composes a new combination of a cycle and a tune according to his own inspiration. The musical expression varies according to a principle of interchange and variation.

FIG.1A ET 1B: Two versions of the song *Naveru'* (Throwing the tongue) performed by Padmavati and Janaki. The purpose of this song is to protect upper castes families from the influence of evil eye and evil tongue. The singer accompanies herself with a musical pot, *kutam*, in which a string has been fixed. The rhythmic cycle follows three pitches (low, medium, high) according to the tightness of the string.

Fig. 1a : Padmavati's version. Tune 1 combined with a cycle of 7 beats (3+2+2).

Fig.1b : Janaki's version. Tune 2 combined with a cycle of 2 beats.



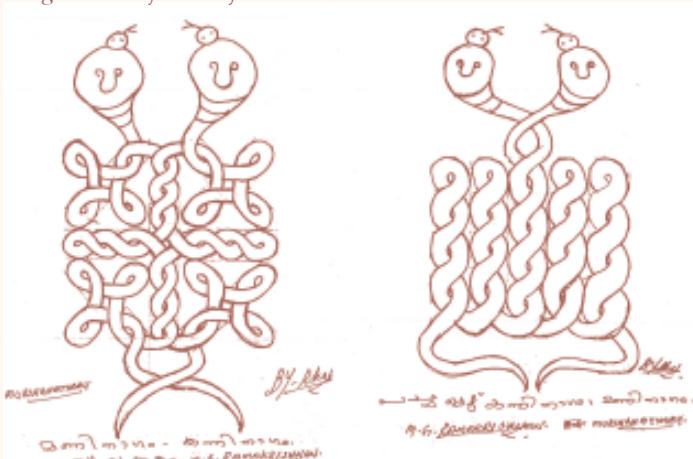
Aesthetics of variation

The musicians describe the two versions (See figs.) as the same song because of the similarity of the text. Many Pulluvan explain: "This is the same song, but it is different". They underline the unity of text but the difference in musical realisation. Pulluvan musicians have developed a specific discourse about variation. To the question "Why the tunes are different?", they usually refer to *kalam*, the drawings made on the ground:

"According to the imagination of the artist, any form of *kalam* can be drawn. Our ideas must be discussed with people who are with us otherwise the *kalam* form will be of a different type. For that, mutual instructions will be given. The snake *kalam* is one, but we are drawing it in different forms, *rupam*. This is the same for songs, the story is always the same, but the tune changes!" (Interview with Pulluvan Ramakrishnan, 2000).

The musician-drawer Ramakrishnan states a principle of variation in music and graphic activity as well. During his explanation, Ramakrishnan took a small notebook in which he drew many sketches of *kalam*. Musicians usually use this support to memorise song texts and graphic techniques. The notebook is the main support of their reflexivity. It is also a way to create new forms of *kalam* and to "test" the interlaces before drawing them in the courtyard of the patrons.

Fig. 2: Two forms of *kalam* « with two heads »



These are two forms of the same *kalam* "with two heads", also called with the name of deities "Jewel snake *Maninagam*/ Virgin snake *Kanninagam*" (fig.2). We note the two heads of the snakes, common to both sketches. The number of snakes usually denotes the category of *kalam*. Pulluvan categorise the drawings through their fixed elements and similarly they identify the songs by a fixed text. In the same way, specialists use different stocks of visual elements (colours, form of motives) just as they choose different possibilities of musical elements (tunes, cycles).

Pulluvan's search for variation, both in music and *kalam*, refers to the ritual action as a whole. In this context, the variation of music and drawing guarantees the ritual symbolic efficacy. Musicians explain that what is "beautiful", *bhamgi*, concerns mostly the variation. The more it varies, the more beautiful it is. If the *kalam* changes from a ritual to another, the deities will be pleased and the ritual will be successful. The search for "beauty" is embedded in the ritual necessity to please the deities. Here, aesthetics and ritual efficacy proceed from the same intention. In the same manner, the patrons of upper castes families are really sensitive to the beauty of the music and images. They usually select the "best" Pulluvan for his skills both in song and drawing.

About "Intersection"

The ethnographic account of the "audiovisual" activity of this caste of musicians shows complex interplay between visual and sound, which must be thought here as two interdependent variables. Music and image appear in a process of "intersection", a concept developed by French musicologist Jean-Yves Bosseur (1998), in the context of Western contemporary arts of the twentieth century. According to, the concept of intersection denotes "the intervals that can be understood as unifying and/or distinguishing different artistic practices" (1998 : 8). Such definition raises a broader discussion about the different modes of convergence between visual and sound idioms. Intersection, as an analysing tool, enables us to qualify the different techniques or processes used to link visual and sound, as synesthesia (ibid: 9-48), interplay between space and time (ibid: 49-90), "structural homologies" (ibid: 91-131) or "plural activities" (ibid: 91-131).

In the Pulluvan example, music is part of a composite practical knowledge. The study of musical and graphic repertoires enables us to throw light on one aspect of "intersection" only. Here the intersection denotes a composition process. Indeed, besides music and graphics, there is also sophisticated interplay between space and time on the ritual space. These are also formalised as an intersection by the musicians and other actors of the ritual (Guillebaud 2006ip).

The most striking aspect of Pulluvan's theories is the status which is given to the music itself that music is always defined as non existing by itself, but only by referring to another art and knowhow. Referring to an external component, the visual medium, or the plasticity of drawing, provides the music with its concepts.

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**The theme of January 2007 issue of
Indian Folklife is
The Legend: Conceptual Issues
and Pragmatics of Telling**

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The folklorists have paid relatively little attention to the legend compared to the privileged genres like the myth, epic and the folktale. It happened because the genre was not utilised for nationalistic or colonial politics like many other items of folklore. Its definition is based on western experience and does not exactly correspond with Indian reality or situations outside Judeo-Christian societies. Therefore, it is necessary to address the issue of cross-cultural definition of the genre. Similarly classification of legends also posits problems. This issue of *Indian Folklife* will deal with the comprehensive understanding of the genre in folklore scholarship, the functions of legends in different cultural contexts, the relationship between legend, belief and politics. Moreover, so far little attention has been paid to Indian urban legends and there will be an attempt to outline the stock of Indian urban legends also.