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Between Fame and Shame

Performing Women – Women Performers in India

Edited by Heidrun Brückner,
Hanne M. de Bruin and Heike Moser

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Women's Musical Knowledge and Power,
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*A Case Study of Kaikkottukali*¹

Christine Guillebaud

The issue of gender raised recently in ethnomusicology, too, opens up new theoretical considerations for the study of musical performances, such as the questions as how music creates asymmetric power settings and gender conflicts, maintains social and sexual order or, on the contrary, works as an agent of change, contestation and inversion (KOSKOFF 1987; HERNDON, ZIEGLER 1990). While some authors consider music as a social space for the construction of inter-gender relationships, others focus on their own position as female scholars during fieldwork, as conditioned by the music repertoire they study and the socio-political settings (BABIRACKI 1997). Yet none of these studies explores the question of the authority of musical knowledge that different groups of performers possess. What exactly constitutes authority in a musical context? Who are its agents and what constitutes the economy of power that informs the aesthetic codification of music?

Music and caste

The link between musical authority and caste organisation is central to the Indian context. If musical knowledge is related to social hierarchy, one should look more carefully at the status of the musicians who produce it. This observation is particularly relevant for 'professional music', performed as a specialised activity by representatives of a particular caste and patronised by the members of other castes, who often tend to be of a higher status than the performers themselves.²

1 I would like to thank Hanne M. de Bruin for the care she took in reading this article and for her insightful comments.

2 Among the local castes of musicians which have been documented, I would like to mention the musician-genealogists, the Manghaniyars and Langas of Rajasthan (KOTHARI 1972, 1973, 1990), the temple musicians in Kerala (TARABOUT 1993), the musician-tailors of Nepal (TINGEY 1994) and the specialists of domestic rituals in Kerala (GUILLEBAUD 2008).

Among India's great diversity of musical repertoires and musical theories, those rooted in the classical musical systems representing the »Great Tradition« – both North Indian (Hindustani) and South Indian (Carnatic) – are the most socially valued (BABIRACKI 1991). Classical music is an »elite art« that legitimates its superiority over other musical traditions by claiming to follow the rules and praxis laid down in the written treatises on music (QURESHI 1991, 2000). Moreover, the classical musical system might be labelled as a »dominant musicology«, because of its rationalization of musical concepts, an important step in the process of theorizing about music. Many consider such an analytical-theoretical approach, which takes its origins and authority from classical sources, the only valid way to study the vast diversity of musical practices in India (GUILLEBAUD 2005).

In the case of low caste musicians, it is rather difficult to study their music with the tools offered by the classical musical theory, because the concept of *raga* and the analytical rationalization of rhythmic classifications (*tala*) that form part of the classical system do not find a place in the musical knowledge of these low caste performers or, at least not in such an analytical way. In addition, the ultimate aim of their music appears to be the attainment of ritual efficacy rather than a unique aesthetic satisfaction. As a component of ritual actions or as a service dedicated to local deities, it is embedded in a complex interplay between ritual officiants, patrons, gods and devotees. Differences in the objectives of these particular forms of music are reflected in the nature of the musical knowledge and its application by the exponents. For this reason, high caste people perceive low caste performers often as unable to theorize about what they perform. Specialists of classical music, who often belong to the higher castes, deny low caste musicians any form of musical authority in order to establish themselves as experts: they are the ones who »know« how to analyze musical structures, whereas the low caste musicians are considered »performers« only.

The Kaikkottukali example

In the case of non-professional music, as for the group dance *kaikkottukali* (»play of clapping or beating hands«), the construction of musical authority seems to vary according to gender and age – important criteria that determine the status of an individual in the local society. Yet, caste as a criterion is not completely absent. The same musical repertoire performed by different castes can change considerably in its codes of execution. And those who are considered the experts as regards the possession of musical knowledge (e.g. men, women, old people) vary from one caste to another. In this article, I will highlight *kaikkottukali*, a dance traditionally performed by women in Kerala, to illustrate differences in the execution of this particular form in relation to the social status of its performers. The performance of *kaikkottukali* is characterized by a highly

flexible nature that allows for changes in the aesthetic features of the performance according to place, context and status of the performers.

A preliminary ethnographic exploration will provide an insight into the social relationships, in particular those involving caste and gender, which traditionally have shaped the aesthetic codification of this dance. Thereafter, I will examine how both the social reform movement and the nation-building process in Kerala in the 20th century, have contributed to the creation of new forms of leadership in the context of musical performance and the possession of musical authority.

In the ethnographic depictions of folklorists of the early 20th century (ANANTHAKRISHNA IYER 1912; THURSTON, RANGACHARI 1909), *kaikkottukali* is introduced as a ›feminine‹ speciality, mainly performed by Brahmins and Nayers both of which are socially dominant castes in Kerala. When I started my fieldwork on *kaikkottukali*, local scholars provided me with contacts of women performers who were considered the best regional ›experts‹. All of them were Namputiri Brahmins, but their styles of singing were very different. One singer, called Savitri, who had a professional training in classical music, performed *kaikkottukali* music with a vocal technique rich of melisms and ornaments. Another Brahmin woman, a housewife also called Savitri, had a huskier voice. She did not use any melodic embellishments. Both informants considered these aesthetic contrasts simply as individual variations, which they attributed to their different musical backgrounds. Their discourse about *kaikkottukali* agreed on the fact that both considered this dance to be typically ›feminine‹ and typically ›brahmin‹, that is to say a typical art form among Antarjanam (›people living / being inside‹), the local name to refer to Brahmin women.³

Kaikkottukali generally is performed as a group dance form inside the house during domestic festivals (marriages, ritual celebrations, such as Onam and Tiruvatira⁴) or during informal meetings when members of a family or an entire neighbourhood get together. These occasions for dancing and singing together are part of a feminine sociability and are generally accompanied by other domestic activities, such as culinary preparations and collective baths with water plays (*tudichu kuli*). Most women associate *kaikkottukali* with prosperity. They perform in order ›to have a good husband‹, a recurrent theme of the songs most of which are about the love between the god Krishna and the shepherdess Radha.

3 Until the middle of the 20th century, Brahmin women were not allowed to leave the familial premises. Their social interactions with people outside the house were limited and strictly regulated.

4 Onam and Tiruvira are two important festivals in Kerala. The dance, which is a part of the festival celebrations, is also called *tiruvatirakali* (›play of Tiruvatira‹).

1. *Performance and power*

The *kaikkottukali* dance is widespread among Brahmin women, but it is performed in similar contexts by members of low caste communities, in particular Toddy tappers (Ilava) and Washermen (Mannan), too. However, women belonging to these castes generally are not considered as ›experts‹ in singing and dancing by Kerala society. It should be pointed out that high caste women most of the time are unfamiliar with *kaikkottukali* practiced by low caste women. However, if they know about it, they do not acknowledge the musical skills of these lower caste women, in addition to perceiving the body postures, manner of carrying out gestures and rendering of songs in a very negative way. The following ethnographic observations of *kaikkottukali* performances enable us to identify important contrasts between the aesthetic codes used by high caste and low caste groups of performers. The descriptions focus on stylistic variations and different ways in which these two distinct groups validate the musical knowledge, authority and skills of the performers.

My first description concerns a performance held in a Namputiri Brahmin house and the second a village festival, which took place in a quarter inhabited by Toddy tappers and Washermen in 2004. The comparison shows to what extent voice culture, musical forms and choreographic postures are ruled by heterogeneous codes and norms.

The performance in the Namputiri house takes place in the domestic sphere and does not require a public audience [see FILM CLIP 1]. The performers share a common physical and emotional experience. Their purpose is to be together, to sing and dance in a collective way. The musical form is responsorial⁵: two women render simultaneously each line of the song while the entire group repeats the same verses. However, all participants perform identical body movements. The musical tempo, the intensity and the pitch are progressively ascendant and provide an indicator of a collective arousing. Voice and movements are used as sensitive media to express feminine sociability.

The musical authority of this performance may be questioned because of its intimacy in the family setting, its domestic location and the absence of a public audience. In this Brahmin area, the *kaikkottukali* repertoire is the prerogative of women. The oldest lady of the family generally is considered the main possessor of musical knowledge. For example, she decides which songs should be performed and she should be able to recall the lines and appropriate words if other participants forget them. In addition, the distribution of musical parts transposes such hierarchical roles. The solo singers direct the text, the melodic line, the steps and the general movement. As the repositories of musical authority, they call themselves the ›troupe leaders‹. However, this term has come in

5 Ethnomusicological term describing the musical process of alternance, generally between a soloist and a choir.

vogue recently, in particular in the context of Radio and TV programs of folk music (GUILLEBAUD 2008: 118–155) held by the State Government to promote a ›keralite‹ local heritage, something to which I will come back below.

The second performance of *kaikkottukali* I observed was held in a quarter of Toddy-tappers and Washermen [see FILM CLIP 2]. It consisted of dancing in front of an audience mainly composed of villagers. Songs and body movements were performed by women only, but the general organisation of the dance was determined in detail by men. Men were instrumental in deciding in advance how many musical pieces had to be performed. They addressed the solo singer, considered to be the most experienced of the group, and cued her to begin the dance by counting with intensity: »One, two, three, four!« The use of the English language appeared to be a way to exert their authority over the form and content of the performance.

This collective dance is performed with the aim of achieving prosperity, too. But unlike the previous example where the dance was executed by Brahmin women inside their houses, here the dance was a public event in which all members of the local families participated. Even though women can and do dance among themselves, generally at night after finishing the domestic tasks, men perceived these activities rather as informal ›rehearsals‹ in preparation for the public village festivals than as performances proper.

In public performance contexts, men standing outside the circle of women performers can also sing the *kaikkottukali* repertoire. Most of the times their musical skills are basic and their pitch quite imprecise. They themselves are aware of the fact that they don't perform as ›beautifully‹ as the women and »don't know the lines« so well. They usually follow the song texts written down in small notebooks by their spouses or sisters and use microphones in order to occupy the sonic space – yet another way to underline their authority over the women's performance.

The low caste women used a completely different aesthetics from the Brahmin women, in particular with regard to their gestures and postures. Their chests were comparatively inclined, arms moved in a slower motion. Some scholars have analysed the steps and gestures of *kaikkottukali* as one of the main sources that went into the making of the classical dance Mohiniyattam in Kerala (VENU / PANIKER 1995: 31; VENU 1990: 95). This general statement cannot be extended beyond the unique aesthetics of the dance as used by the Brahmin women. Indeed, Brahmin women often considered the performances of *kaikkottukali* by other castes as a degenerated form of the dance, a »non-original *kaikkottukali*« or a »poor dance performed by illiterate people who don't know anything« and »just imitate Brahmins«. Such depreciating statements are very common among Brahmin women. The differences observed in aesthetic codes, and their validation by the Brahmin women performers who are considered to be ›more knowledgeable‹ with regard to the ›right‹ form and content of the dance, contribute to the creation of unequal power settings.

Brahmin women performers themselves invoked the issue of gender in their definitions of what is a ›good‹ or ›correct‹ *kaikkottukali* dance. The fact that men from low castes take part in the songs, or dance with women during the last part of village ceremonies is seen as particularly objectionable by high caste women. An example of a mixed performance recorded in 2004 [see FILM CLIP 3] shows the extent to which the dance *kaikkottukali* mediates a village's sociability. The performance takes place at the end of a local village festival and brings together male and female performers in a common dance. The low caste community, too, has its ›group leaders‹: two male performers who are responsible for the annual organisation of the local festivities and participate themselves with vigour in the dance event. Public participation is intense among other members, too: all villagers attend the dance and clap their hands in a common rhythm. The dance ends with a collective shout (»*ayayo!*«) and in a joyful atmosphere, which is not necessarily the case during ›feminine‹ public performances recorded previously in the same low caste village [see FILM CLIP 2].

In the eyes of Brahmin women, a dance in which the genders mix is definitely distasteful. But even more than hurting their aesthetic feelings, the negative perception they harbour of the dance when performed by low caste people appears to follow from the apparent mixing of genders displayed on such an occasion⁶. In contrast, low caste participants do not perceive the performance of *kaikkottukali* as a privileged means for feminine sociability, but as a community celebration for villagers belonging to the same locality. »We have a good cooperation!«, the inhabitants willingly admit.

We may conclude that the same dance is performed in different ways according to the perceptions and performance needs the participating castes have with regard to the dance and with regard to the performance contexts in which it takes place. Among Brahmins, *kaikkottukali* contributes to the creation of a special, idealized feminine image, in addition to ascertaining Brahmin women's sociability within their own community, while among low castes, it mediates village sociability as a whole. The experts of musical knowledge vary also from one caste to the other. Among Brahmins, female gender and age of the group leaders set the authority, while among low castes, musical authority is fundamentally conceived as masculine.

2. *Kaikkottukali as an instrument to facilitate social reform movements*

During the beginning of the 20th century Kerala witnessed the birth of a number of social reform movements, many of which were caste based (CHERIAN 1999: 452). These reform movements had not only their impact on traditional beliefs,

6 See also SEIZER (2005) on the inappropriateness of the ›mixing of genders‹ in the lowly validated form of Tamil Special Natakam.

customs and power relations in Kerala, but affected also the musical scene and the ways in which particular forms of music and dance, such as *kaikkottukali*, were being used by the Namputiri Brahmins as the cultural emblems to define a new progressive caste identity.

Yogakshema Association of Namputiri Brahmins and the position of women

Through the advent of the social reform association Yogakshema in 1908, Namputiris realized that some traditional customs resulted in injustice, in particular for their women: due to the law of primogeniture, only few women could marry and this caused an increase in spinsterhood and, when the husband was much older, widowhood. As a matter of fact, this law dictated that only the eldest son was entitled to marry within his own caste, stimulating others to marry outside their caste and depriving the children of these outside alliances of their father's property. The Yogakshema, through its journal *Unni Namputiri*, spread new ideas among the Namputiri community, which resulted in an unprecedented awakening. The journal published articles criticizing established customs and drew attention to the educational backwardness of the community, which were instrumental in initiating different kinds of reform⁷. These reforms provided the members of the Namputiri caste, whether male or female, with the right to get married inside their caste and legalized the equal inheritance of children of the family property.

The Yogakshema Association is today a registered society and has three sections: the General Government Board represented by different committees or units in each district (*jilla* committees), a Ladies Wing (*vanita sabha*) and a Youth Wing (*yuvajana sabhā*). The Ladies and Youth sections of the Association are concerned with family issues and deal with children's affairs. They hold cultural activities (arts, sports and games), are involved in charity through providing, for instance, scholarships to students and grants for marriages. Each unit sells food items made by the ladies of the unit under the label *Janani products*.

The Yogakshema reform movement has been decisive for the emancipation of Namputiri women. Gradually, women gave up traditional customs, such as the carrying of a leaf umbrella (*marakkuda*) and wearing of a blanket covering the body (*ghosa*), and began to reject domestic restrictions (SHEEBA 2001: 931). These changes reflect the rise of political consciousness among women and their participation in social reform movements (see VELAYUDHAN 1994). In addition, literary works, such as Lalithambika Antarjanam's writings, highlighted the resistance of the Antarjanams against existing customs and attempted to reframe subjection of women in new terms through focusing on their right to express their sexuality and through re-interpretating »mythological women« in

⁷ The Tiruvitamkur Malayala Brahman Regulation in 1930 and thus, the Madras Nambudiri Acts in 1933 (VASANTHA 2000: 752-763). For an historical account of the Yogakshema association and the social reform movement among Brahmins, read <http://www.namboothiri.com/articles/yogakshemamahaasabha.htm>.

the light of contemporary values (SHEEBA 2001: 934–936). Gradually, male-female relationships were re-negotiated.

Kaikkottukali as a ›Brahmin‹ art form today

Even today the theme of gender relationships remains in vogue in the Yogakshema association. The *kaikkottukali* dance is used as a medium for the empowerment of women. Every year, a dance competition is held during which different groups of performers trained in their locality as »yogakshema troupes« come together. The teams of each unit participate in an annual competition and the best are selected and sent to the district and state festivals. Judges from outside the association, mainly Brahmins, but not especially from the Namputiri caste, are appointed. The competition is held according to the ages of the performers and involves other art forms, too.⁸ During the year, older ladies (called »grandmothers« or *mutassi*) organize meetings of *kaikkottukali* in villages to rehearse for these competitions, but also to perform during the traditional ritual functions (marriages, temple festivals etc.). According to Pushpakumari, the Secretary of the Ladies Wings in 2006, and a *kaikkottukali* singer:

We work to encourage women [to engage in *kaikkottukali*] for their empowerment (*strisakti karanam*) and prosperity (*vanita vibhavam*), not only physically but also mentally. Art forms are introduced to have a healthy mind and body, also for children. Competitions are held in October, on the second Saturday and Sunday. It is called *tauryatrikam*⁹: melody (*raga*), cycle (*tala*), rhythm (*laya*), expression (*bhava*). It is a Sanskrit word. Dance forms such as Tiruvatira [*kaikkottukali*], Mohiniyattam, Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Ottan tullal [different forms of dance and drama] are represented. All generations participate and all families attend the competition. It is good for mental refreshment and entertainment. All members of the community get closer. The association works to unite people and preserve traditions. (Pushpakumari, Interview 2006)

By organizing new performances, the Yogakshema association has introduced the dance into the public sphere. And, among the art forms promoted through the association, *kaikkottukali* is particularly enhanced, as a group leader told me:

Kaikkottukali is very important because religion and life style are connected. The dance is originally an offering of the Goddess Parvati to Lord Siva (Parvati *sumangali*). It is Siva's birthday's celebration by his wife [...] ¹⁰. They represent a model couple

8 Besides the main traditional dances, other arts forms are encouraged as mimicry, cinematic dance and human painting (called »tableaux«) consisting of a group of people arranged as a collective of fixed poses exhibiting mythological scenes and current social and political issues.

9 Tauryatrikam can be explained as »music, dance and playing of instrument combined« (C. Madhavan Pillai: *Malayalam-English Dictionary*, 1999: 510).

10 According to this original myth, the Goddess cooked traditional preparation using plants and roots, which she had collected in the forest (OMANA 2000).

for our community. Both Siva and Parvati are made from each other. They represent social equality. Art form is our advice. Real life is in Kailasam [mythical location of God Siva and Parvati]; it is our model life! (Shobana, Interview 2006)

In addition to defining *kaikkottukali* as a typically ›brahmin‹ and ›feminine‹ art form, the dance also implements new social and inter-gender relationships.

Such institutionalisation of *kaikkottukali* dance by the Yogakshema association has created new aesthetic codes and caused a new distribution of roles. Performances now take place on stage. The troupe ›leaders‹ stand backstage outside the circle of dancers. They use microphones to render the songs, while other participants are dancing in the foreground. Such separation reinforces the authoritative roles of the singers through performance itself and seems to be another form of appropriation of sonic space, as already mentioned in the case of low caste male ›singers‹. Besides, the musical and choreographic structures change because of this new stage display. The separation of dance and singing gives rise to greater independence and complexity of both forms of expression. The judges appointed by the Yogakshema for these annual competitions explain this evolution through referring to the technical constraints of having more physical distance between people on stage and audience:

When ten people dance together, we cannot hear their voices. That is the reason why microphones are preferred. But this is only for the stage. Traditional steps, songs, body movements and rhythm are preferred. Songs have to be preserved in pure traditional style. (Shobana, Interview 2006)

The tension created by the evolution of aesthetic codes in response to a different perception of the artistic form and the role of women in it and in response to new performance venues, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the prescriptive rules with regard to steps, movement and music as represented in the above discourse about ›tradition‹ are at the very core of the debate about the form and content of the dance among *kaikkottukali* performers. Such debates mainly involve Brahmin women, who were pivotal in reshaping the dance and adapting it to the stage's requirements and who made it into an important medium for social change for their community, in general, and for the empowerment of Brahmin women, in particular. The keen interest of the Yogakshema in promoting *kaikkottukali* as an instrument of social change for their own Brahmin community contributed to the establishment of the dance as a caste-based art form, despite the great diversity of practices of this form in Kerala, which was practiced other by castes, too. One may note that such institutionalization did not taken place among low castes for whom the social struggle dealt less with women's conditions, but with caste inequalities (GUILLEBAUD [2010]). As mentioned earlier, *kaikkottukali* among low castes generally is performed as a village community art form involving both genders. This might be a pos-

sible reason to explain why the same dance form is a potentially less powerful medium to contribute to the shaping of a ›feminine‹ identity within low caste communities. In comparison, Namputiris have appropriated *kaikkottukali* as ›their‹ art form, because of a better organisation of their caste and a better representation of the artistic features defining the ›femininity‹ of Brahmin ladies. Here, the contemporary history of a particular performing arts form perfectly fits with the history of local power dynamics.

3. *Performing the Nation*

The appropriation of *kaikkottukali* by the Namputiri (women) community has not been without repercussions in the wider contemporary Kerala society. When the Brahmins were reshaping the dance to suit their own requirements, the Kerala Government was building a wider cultural and political framework to promote local arts as typically ›keralite‹.

Since 1956, the date of the creation of the Kerala State, *kaikkottukali* has undergone important changes in its execution modalities and performance venues. The communist government of Kerala has promoted it as a ›national‹ repertoire, together with other forms of local music and dances.¹¹ This political project intends to advocate a kind of ›keralite‹ cultural unity, which transcends the hierarchical splits brought about by caste and religion. The Government was instrumental in devising a wide-ranging cultural policy, which favours the creation of new spaces for the celebration and organisation of festivals in cities, in addition to creating ›Tourism Week Celebrations‹ in Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala. Many musical troupes from all over Kerala are invited to participate in such celebrations held on the occasion of the Onam festival¹². They receive payments for their stage performances, which are dedicated to all citizens who are invited to ›rediscover‹ their own ›cultural heritage‹ (TARABOUT 2005: 199). Indeed, local music has become a privileged tool for the process of nation building. *Kaikkottukali*, which was earlier associated with ritual and domestic life, has become a public cultural event to commemorate the national history of Kerala and its recent political unity.

11 The Kerala Communist Party (KCP) was elected for the first time in 1957, one year after the creation of this new State in independent India. Marxists have ruled the region in coalition with other parties and alternately with Congress-led coalitions.

12 *Onam* (full name *Tiruwonam*) derives its name from a ›constellation‹ (*naksatra*). The festival celebrates the mythological King Mahabali whose reign is associated with prosperity. The date of the feast is calculated according to the lunar mansions and takes place during the solar month of ›Lion‹ (Cinnam, mid-August / mid-September). For further readings on this festival, see KURUP 1966, MARAR 1979, KUNJAN PILLAI 1981.

A dance for the younger generation

In addition to the organisation of cultural celebrations in cities, the government promotes the dissemination of Kerala's cultural heritage through performances in schools. The younger generation is invited to participate in different competitions patronised by the Education Ministry and local bodies, such as the municipal corporation, district organisations, etc. Even more so than promoting the local exponents of these art forms, such events intend to initiate a new transmission process of musical knowledge through inviting students, irrespective of their caste and religion, to learn different Kerala performing arts forms and to perform them in competitive contexts. This young generation is advertised as the main bearer of the Keralite cultural heritage with the aim is to allow a new social category, »Youth«, to emerge as the main driving force behind national culture and as a valid alternative to earlier categories defined by caste and / or religious identities.

Among school competitions, the »Kerala State Youth Festival« (renamed in 2006 *School kalotsvam / School arts festival*) is the most important. It is held once a year, every time in a different city in Kerala and receives extensive media coverage. The art forms showcased during this festival are performed exclusively on a stage. In the case of *kaikkottukali*, two main singers stand back-stage, keeping the pitch with a *sruti-box* and the rhythm with small cymbals. The student troupes do not have authoritative »leaders« and musical roles are attributed according to the individual abilities of the performers. Students are trained to represent the school they belong to. They perform independently of their caste origin or gender; sometimes initiating new, unexpected performance settings, for instance those featuring girls who have mastered and perform – sometimes at technically very advanced levels – instruments, which in the past were reserved exclusively for male performers and ritual performance venues.

These public performances of Kerala's national culture by schools are highly competitive. Rivalry between individual schools have motivated parents to become involved in the rehearsal processes and to spend considerable budgets on the appointment of individual tutors for their children.

The troupes do everything to attract the attention of the judges and to affirm their originality among hundreds of other groups. For example, new steps and dance postures are created, other styles of dancing are introduced, which are mainly borrowed from South Indian classical dances and mixed with the basics of *kaikkottukali*. These changes have given rise to intense debates among specialists about the correct, or the »traditional«, way to perform this dance. The mixing of *kaikkottukali* with elements borrowed from classical South Indian dances certainly captures the attention of the public and the judges. On the other hand, it is especially this strategy (and the inclusion of novel elements), which is most strongly criticized by local performers, in particular those who are involved in Yogakshema units. The Kerala State Youth Festival thus plays a role in renewing the dance, at a sociological as well as at an aesthetic level,

too, and being open to all castes, religions and genders, links up with the basic principle on which the government has built its policy of ›preserving‹ music. »Modification and innovation in order to preserve« could be the motto of this national event. When considered as a way of preserving Kerala's national heritage, this type of competition revolves around the evaluation of performances, not in term of ›authenticity‹, but according to their potential degree of transformation. This innovation process not only sustains the dance, but also legitimises the process by roping in the participation of new ›institutional‹ repositories of musical authority, such as established artists and professors, members of the principal government institutions involved in the arts, such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi or the Kalamandalam Kerala State Academy of Fine Arts.

Finally, I would like to mention the rising interest from video companies in recording *kaikkottukali* performances as releasing them as commercial videos. Recently, the first video CD of *kaikkottukali* performed at the Youth Festival held in Calicut in 2005 was released in two volumes [see ILLUSTRATION 1]. It consists of a selection of the best groups of dancers chosen according to technical criteria, such as the complexity of choreographic sequences and their variety.¹³ Such video CDs are purchased by many students who use them as a support for their training and as sources to copy new ideas from which they then use in their own performances.

An extract of such a recording shows a troupe of young ladies performing *kaikkottukali* during the »8th Kerala State Higher Secondary Youth Festival« [see FILM CLIP 4]. It clearly shows the attention paid by the performers to the dance movements. Most probably, the singing was pre-recorded so as to perfectly coincide with the performance's duration.¹⁴ The choreographic sequences are particularly complex. The dancers move in different rhythms and in various directions both to the back and the front of the public. The bending of the legs and waists are emphasized (to the ground level) and the arm movements have been particularly extended. Every choreographic part is directed with a single unique aim in mind: to focus the public's (and the judge's) attention on the complexity of the movements. Performances such as this one provide a new definition of *kaikkottukali* as a purely visual display.

As compared to *kaikkottukali* performed in different domestic contexts, which I have described earlier, the ›competitive‹ style of *kaikkottukali* has undergone important aesthetic changes and elaborations. In addition, the traditional forms of sociability that used to be actualised through the dance performance

13 These videos are anonymous. The names of performers or troupes are not mentioned.

14 Because of the increasing number of participants, the Youth Festival Organisation Committee has recently adopted new rules for the duration of performances. The shortening of the performances to few minutes has generated new aesthetical changes, such as the replacement of background singers with pre-recorded music. The choreographies, which now have become the core of the performance, are subject to new developments and innovations.

and that emphasized Brahmin femininity and / or the cohesion of a low caste village community have been reshaped to fit a new ›national‹ framework, which organises the social relations of individuals and groups in a different way. While earlier musical knowledge was divided on the basis of hierarchical criteria, such as caste, age and gender, the cultural policy of the Kerala government promotes a national unity based on a ›common‹, shared musical heritage, irrespective of caste and / or religion and represented by the Keralite youth. Aesthetically speaking, the paradigm offered by the Government of Kerala seems to favour – consciously or unconsciously – a mainly ›classical‹ model, which commands a higher status and authority.

4. Performers' self reflexivity of their own performances and musical knowledge

The emergence of new performance contexts and principles of aesthetic codification have resulted in novel representations of the musical and choreographic culture, in particular of also by the high castes *kaikkottukali* performers themselves. These representations involve complex claims with regard to the musical authority of *kaikkottukali*. Nowadays many singers advertise their knowledge of the genre in order to valorise their own caste, and their own (high caste) femininity. The publication of several works about *kaikkottukali*, consisting of compilations of songs and / or directions for the dance in Malayalam, the local language, shows how high caste women performers reaffirm their leadership and their status as the ›authentic‹ bearers of *kaikkottukali* and *kaikkottukali* aesthetics.

These printed books represent an extensive corpus of knowledge, which is indicative of the self-reflexivity of these high caste performers and their individual response to the demands of contemporary reforms, including novel performance venues and public stage arrangements. The authors introduce themselves not only as ›performers‹, but also as ›experts‹ in song and dance. In addition, these publications reveal that Brahmin exponents and exponents of other high castes, in particular Nayars, are engaged in processes of distinction of their respective practices of *kaikkottukali* and the cultural context in which they perceive it to be embedded from each other in order and from other low caste forms in order to ›prove‹ the legitimacy of their caste claims to musical authority and ownership of the form.

For instance, a book published in 2003 by Cheruvakara Parvathi Antharjanam with the title »Traditions of Brahmin Ladies« (*antarjanannalute acarannusthanannal*) [see ILLUSTRATION 2 and 3], features song texts and sketches of *kaikkottukali*, in addition to the main culinary preparations and domestic rituals associated with Brahmin family festivals. Such a process of safeguarding and valorising ›traditional‹ material is mainly carried out by women with a high

social status, such as NAYAR 2004 and WARRIER 1999 [see ILLUSTRATIONS 4–7]. Yet, the perception of Namputiri Brahmin women of the publications by »Nayar« and »Warrier« women of slightly lower (caste) status remains negative. They reveal a strong caste competition within the public sphere with regard to their respective claims to being the (only) »legitimate« representatives of *kaikkottukali* in whom the authority and knowledge about the art form are vested.

As far as the low caste performers, such as the Ilava (Toddy tappers) and Mannan (Washermen) are concerned, such self-reflexivity takes the form of writing down the song texts in small notebooks. The notebooks are used as memory aids when learning the song texts and as a way of transmitting them to other members of a family or a village. The comparatively lower economic status of these performers considerably limits any attempt at a wider dissemination of these notebooks. As a matter of fact, they are never published and if they would had been, they would have a lesser status in terms of musical authority. However, these low caste performers, too, lay claim to the originality of their performances, in particular when compared to the performances and dance style used by high caste women and students in school festivals. Low caste performers tend to qualify such performances as an »imitation of Bharatanatyam«, the South Indian classical dance. Most probably, the argument of »greater originality« enables them to counteract the negative appreciation, which their performances and these notebooks have in the eyes of high caste performers and the implicit denigration by the government establishment. As mentioned earlier, the contemporary validation of *kaikkottukali* involves a highly complex intertwinement between social status, the possession and authority of the musical knowledge, authenticity or originality as possessed by the exponents of specific high caste and lower caste groups.

With specific reference to the women performers, we may conclude that they have tended to use their cultural forms in order to renegotiate and to raise their status in the local society. Depending on their caste, they have been trying to strengthen their authoritative position in the context of nation building and as a response to the powerful impetus of an »egalitarian« governmental cultural policy. However, the social power exercised by Brahmin women seems to have emerged as the dominant form in terms of aesthetic codification. This process appears to have been helped by the promotion and dissemination of their performances through privately produced commercial recordings.

Through the publication of printed books, and, more recently, through the release of musical albums [see ILLUSTRATIONS 8–11] and dance videos [see ILLUSTRATION 12], they have been able to reach wider audiences and publicize »their« point of view of what *kaikkottukali* should be – its form, contents and the specific cultural values associated with its performance. It shows their very easy integration of print and image technologies in the way to diffuse their knowledge today. The videos CD's feature performances by »troupes«, which have been recently constituted on the basis of friendship relations or neighbour-

hood connections, which, in spite of the governments promotion of equality, generally remain caste-based.

An extract of a video CD, released in 2006 [see FILM CLIP 5], shows a *kaikkottukali* dance recorded at the gate of a Brahmin family property (*illam*). The place is decorated sumptuously and the location is explicitly mentioned with the name of the performers. Two troupes, »under the direction of Kanipayoor Sreelatha and Narayanan Namboothiripad in collaboration with the *Kaikkottukali* Art Association (*Kala Kendra*) of Tripunithura, jointly present the traditional dance of Kerala«. Their purpose is to introduce the public to a ›traditional‹ art form. The performance is embedded in a colourful frame added at the time of editing: different food items (bananas, coconut, betel leaves etc.) are displayed on a green background next to small photos representing miniatures of dancers performing Mohiniyattam, the classical dance of Kerala. Such editing intends to display *kaikkottukali* as a typically ›keralite art form‹, which is explicitly connected with domestic everyday life. It emphasizes the ritual content of the ›traditional‹ performance, in addition to its ›auspicious character‹ and ›prosperity‹ – bananas, coconuts and betel leaves are also items offered during domestic rituals, while associating the dance to the other respectable art form, as Mohiniyattam, the Kerala classical dance. The main singers stand backstage and use microphones, while the dancers move in the front part of the stage. In contrast to performances previously described, this troupe is accompanied by two instruments: the hour-glass drum *itakka* – usually used in Kerala temples music – and a barrel drum or *mridangam*, used mainly in the classical music of South India. These additions are significant: while they enrich the music and its rhythmic organisation and timbre, they also mark the performance as a classical and a ritual one. The public is invited to discover a very ›ancient‹ tradition displayed together with other respected art forms and carried out by local celebrities. Such *kaikkottukali* video releases are dedicated to a new audience mainly consisting of members of the urban middle class, and, more recently, of upper caste migrants settled in the Gulf countries. These video albums claim to offer ›authentic‹ musical pieces of *kaikkottukali*, a ›fact‹ usually indicated on the video jackets, and have found a wide reception among the Kerala diaspora in search of their cultural roots.

Conclusions

An investigation of the *kaikkottukali* dance reveals the complexity of the relationships between musical performances, the (re)constitution of aesthetic knowledge and the (changing) ownership of musical authority in relation to changing social and political power dynamics in Kerala society. In this article, I have examined the ways in which the performance of *kaikkottukali* by different groups, in particular the lower caste toddy tappers and washermen and

the women of the high caste Brahmin, and to some extent Nayar communities, have resulted in different kinds of aesthetic change. These changes have been validated and used differently by representatives of these communities as well as by the Kerala government, fostering the differences in cultural interests that came to the fore simultaneously.

The exploration of musical and choreographic codes, which I have attempted here, shows a process of crystallisation where the conflicting values of a caste-based society that organized musical knowledge in hierarchical terms and the cultural policy of a communist government, which aimed to diffuse egalitarian values were accommodated and reformulated to provide Kerala as a newly created State with its own ›traditional‹ cultural identity. While the high caste Brahmin women, aided by social reforms within their own caste favouring women, were able to reaffirm their (caste) identity and superiority in and through their performances of *kaikkottukali*, this appears not to have been the case for women exponents belonging to the lower castes.

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FILM CLIP 1: Kaikkottukali Performance in the Courtyard of a Brahmin House, Irinjalakuda (2004). 3:50. Image: Christine Guillebaud, CNRS.

- FILM CLIP 2: Kaikkottukali Performance in a Village of Toddy-Tappers and Washermen, Kadavaloor (2004). 3:53. Image: Christine Guillebaud, CNRS.
- FILM CLIP 3: Mixed Performance of Kaikkottukali in a Village of Toddy-Tappers and Washermen, Kadavaloor (2004). 2:23. Image: Christine Guillebaud, CNRS.
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