A Short description of the folk arts of Kerala

1. Introduction

The real index to the cultural heritage of a country and its people is to be found in its folk art forms. It is on the stable foundation that has been built up by the folk arts that the later sophisticated forms of art developed and are still developing. So when we analyse the culture in relation to arts of a country and its people, we have necessarily to delve deep into the wealth of folk arts of that country and its people. Music is an essential component of the triumvirate of fine arts. It therefore follows that any study of music should include the study of the folk arts of a particular region.

By painstaking research, scholars have unearthed many ancient and eminent ritual and visual arts that were in vogue in Kerala from times immemorial. There is an argument that folklore should be studied as a scientific subject more than as a subject of art. But one should always remember that pure art is abstract and almost always evades scientific analysis. It is difficult to distinguish between pure folk arts and ritualistic arts. All these are influenced by geographical factors, the occupational
pattern of the people, their historical background, their language and such other innumerable factors. It is worthwhile however to select at random a few among the many folk arts, without the description of which a study on the ragas and talas of Kerala will not be complete.

2. Selected Folk Arts

1. AYYAPPAN PATTU

Ayyappan Pattu is a peculiar art form practised by devotees of Lord Ayyappa in Kerala in general and Kottayam District in particular. The theme of the songs is the life history of Lord Ayyappa and the various episodes in his life. The minimum number of persons to form a troupe of singers is five. The musical instrument used is ‘Udukku’. The performance is in a pandal constructed for the show. There will be a low stool called peetam and an oil lamp called ‘Nilavilakku’. The paattu begins with devotional songs to Ganapathi and Saraswathi. When songs on Ganapathi are sung, a particular rhythm called ‘Ganapathy thalam’ is used. All the padams have set tunes which is not changed. Sometimes along with the song the devotees dance in a particular pattern and sometimes they walk on fire, which is called ‘fire-walking’. Percussion is provided as mentioned earlier by cymbals and udukku. The singers wear black dhothi. A few
of the famous exponents of Ayyappan Pattu are Cheimbil Karan Kandan Asan, M.K. Kuttappanasan and Vechoor Velu Asan.

2. Arjuna Nrittam (Mayilpeeli Thookam)

This kind of dance is popular in Kottayam and Alleppey Districts. It used to be performed in Devi temples in Central Travancore. It has an ancestry of nearly 200 years. Arjuna Nrittam is performed either by one person or by two. The age of the performers range from 16 to 60. The theme of the songs are well known stories from epics and puranas. They are known as ‘Kavithangal’. They are tuned in different rhythms to suit each kavitham. Usually the players explain the rhythm and theme before each performance. The accompanying instruments are chenda, maddalam, thala chenda, and cymbals. Special platforms are built for the dance. The faces of the dancers are painted. A head gear is also worn. Bells are tied round the ankles. Garments made of peacock feathers are tied round the waist. The time of performance is night only. Earlier only the traditional oil lamp was used for lighting. Now sophisticated lighting has come into use. Arjuna is the main character - hence the name Arjuna Nrittam. It is supposed that in order to get the blessings of Devi, Arjuna sings her praises. The dancers are usually trained in Kalaris.
P.S. Kumaran of Kurichi near Changanasseri is a well known exponent of this art form.

3. **Oppana**

Oppana is a special dance performed by the women of the muslim community in Kerala in general and in Malabar in particular. The troupe consists of nearly 15 persons. Both males and females participate in the oppana. The theme is a sort of rejoicing aimed at the bride on the wedding day and the day before. The bride is clothed in her bridal dress. She is led to a pandal and is seated on a 'peetam'. The dancers encircle the bride, sing and dance while clapping their hands rhythmically and utter merrisome and ticklish words. Two or three girls will sing the song at first and others will repeat it. Only the type of songs called 'Mappila pattu' are sung on the occasion.

Oppana is performed by males when the bridegroom leaves for the bride's house or just before he enters the bride's chamber. There is no fixed time for the performance. The duration is also not fixed. There is no special stage or platform. Musical instruments used are harmonium, tabala, ganjira and elathalam.
4. **Kuthiyottam**

Kuthiyottam is also performed in the Devi temples of Travancore. A place called Chettikulangara near Mavelikkara in Alappuzha District is particularly famous for Kuthiyottam. This is a perfectly ritualistic art. Normally 5 persons partake of it. The dance is performed during the annual festivals of temples. The songs are devotional and are sung by the performers to the rhythm of percussion instruments. Humorous songs are also sung. The duration of the performance is nearly one hour. In one type of Kuthiyottam the performers pierce a long iron/copper rod through their body parts as an offering to Devi. In Devi temples in South Travancore a hook is pierced at the back of the performer on the strength of which he performs the 'thookkam vazhipadu' by revolving round a circular ring specially made for the purpose.

5. **KALAM PATTU**

Kalampattu is prevalent in certain areas of Malabar and is performed there by Kaniyars and Peruvannars. In Central Kerala this is known as Kalamezhuthupattu and is usually performed by Kuruppanmars. No age limit is prescribed for the performers. In North Kerala this is a means of livelihood for the Kalampattu artists.
The method of performance is as follows. A Kalam is drawn on the floor using flours of rice, turmeric, coal, etc. of different hues. The figure of Bhadrakali is drawn in the Kalam. A woman supposed to be possessed by evil spirit enter the kalam. At that time the Kaniars sing what is called Kalamiraku pattu. Then the rituals ‘Kalathilari’, and after that the ‘Kizhiyedukal’ are performed. A woman stands near the kalam with a bunch of coconut flowers in her hands. Then a song called ‘Badhachalana pattu’ is sung. Songs from the puranas are also recited. The performance comes to a close with ‘polivu pattu’. 5 to 15 persons take part in the performance. The accompaniments used are jingling bells, cymbals, nanduni, chenda, maddalam etc.

The Kalampattu of the Kaniyars is a social ritual performed for the safety of the child in the womb, for securing offspring and for general health. Raman Gurukkal of Cannanore, P.V. Narayan also of Cannanore, Kallat Sankara Kurup Vavannoor, are a few of the exponents of this art.

6. KAKKARISSI NATAKAM

This is a community entertainment popular in the Travancore area and especially in Central Travancore. Low caste people like Panars and Kammalars are the chief exponents of Kakkarissi natakam. The art has a tradition of 300 years.
The theme goes as follows. Siva and Parvathi and Ganga, in the garb of Kakkan and Kakkathi make their incarnation in the world to eradicate evils. Naradan goes to mount Kailas and request the Lord to do the above. The Kakkathis dance to invoke the presence of Kakkan. Hearing the song the Kakkan appears with a torch (panthom) in hand and goes through the audience to the stage. On the stage there is a dialogue between the Kakkan and the local chieftain. Characters like Vedan, Kakkathis, Thampuran, Kuravan, Kurathi etc. also appear on the stage. The duration of the play is 3 to 5 hours. Many sub plots make the play quite interesting. There is a combination of music and dance. The costumes of actors have a peculiar rustic nature. Kakkathis wear colourful dresses while Kakkan wears black cloth. Vedan and Kuravan paste Charcoal over their bodies. There are local variations in the style of make-up.

7. KURATHIYATTOM

Kurathiyattom is performed in some temples in Kerala during annual festivals. The name itself suggests that Kurathiyattom is performed by a particular tribe called Kurava. There are two styles, the Southern style and the Northern style. According to the southern style two actors dressed as the wives
of Vishnu and Siva appear and dance to the songs and rhythm given. There is a verbal warfare and when it reaches its climax a Kurathi appears and puts an end to the war and sends them away.

According to the Northern style the Kuravan and Kurathi go to see the Thrissur temple festival. It so happens that they are separated. The song and dance express their experiences on separation. There is an intention behind this theme. It is to discourage the habit of drinking. So this may be called a dance for social reform. The accompaniments used are mridangam, harmonium, cymbals etc. The duration of the performance is 2 to 3 hours. Kuttikrishna Marar of Payyanoor and Kunjirama Poduval also from Payyannoor had well known troupes for Kurathiyattom.

8. KUMMATTI

Kummatti is an art performed in the Northern parts of Kerala especially in Wynad, Trichur, Alathoor and Chittoor in Palaghat Districts. Members of all castes participate in this performance. In Trichur this is a common entertainment during Onam. In other parts Kummatti is more or less ritualistic. The number of participants ranges from 8 to 10. The leader is called
'Thallakkummatti'. The Kummatti charactors dance while the Thallakkummatti with the Kummatti- kol in hand begins to act. The spectators are Kummattis dressed in the garb of Hindu gods like Siva, Krishna, Ganapathi etc. Kummatti characters roam about in the village and make their performances from house to house. Only a small drum is used as percussion instrument. The Kummatti characters wear strange costumes and masks.

9. KOL KALI

This is an art form which requires a lot of physical skill. Hindus in general and Harijans in particular (middle aged men) who are farmers by profession, are the exponents of this art. 12 to 20 persons take part in this. A lighted 'nilavilakku' is placed at the centre of the stage. Each dancer carrying a stick about 24 inches long dance by hitting one another with the sticks. The defence is also with the stick. The display is accompanied by rhythm and songs specially suited for the play.

10. GARUDAN THOOKAM

Garudan Thookam is a very ancient folk art. The exact age of its origin is not known. The main centres of this art are presently
Vaikom, Udayanapuram, Alleppey and nearby places, North Paravur, Tripunithura etc.

The way of performance is as follows. Two or three dancers dress themselves as garudas. They dance according to the rhythm of percussion instruments in imitation of garuda. The sound of the instrument, the shouting of the onlookers, the bursting of crackers, all produce the effect of a battle. In the end the dancer gets into a cart, goes round the temple and donates blood. The instruments used are chenda, maddalam, cymbals, horn etc. The duration of the performance is one night. Garudan Thookam is performed in Kerala during March and April.

11. THIRUVATHIRA KALI

The name itself suggests that this is an art to be performed on the Thiruvathira day in the Malayalam month of Dhanu. But now this has become a common dance from during important festivals like Onam, Vishu etc. Legend has it that Thiruvathira day is the birthday of Lord Siva. The dance is presented by Parvathy commemorating the day. Thiruvathira Kali begins with the ritual called ‘Thudichu kuli’ by young women, the number of them ranging from ten to fourteen. Always the number of participants will be even numbers because there are many coupling steps and dance
forms in this art. The women dress up in typical Kerala costume, apply sandal wood paste on their foreheads and profusely use flowers of jasmine etc. The dance is of the sopana style. The songs are taken mostly from Kadhakali padams. Nowadays Thiruvathira Kali is accompanied on instruments like tambourine, cymbals, small chendas etc. The play may take 1 to 3 hours.

12. THEEYATTU

This is also a folk art performed by the upper classes of society in the villages of Central Travancore. Namboothiris and Theeyattunnis performed this as a ritual. An antiquity of 1500 years is claimed for Theeyattu. The minimum number of persons needed to perform a Theeyattu is three. Normally this is done after dusk in the front courtyard. The figure of Bhadrakali is painted in a ‘Kalam’. Then prayers are offered to the favourite deity. The performance begins with an invocatory dance and song paying respects to the sacred dark body of the Goddess and her glazing eyes. The instruments used are veeku chenda, cymbal and chengila. Offerings to Ganapathy, commonly known as ‘Ganapathiyorukkam’ are also done. The costume resemble that of Kadhakali. There are two types of Theeyattu called Kali
Theeyattu and Ayyappan Theeyattu. Sometimes the main player called the Velichappadu, the representative of the Goddess dances and enters into a trance. During this time he spells certain strange words which are taken as the ‘arulappadu’ of the Goddess herself and is obeyed by the devotees.

13. **THULLAL**

Thullal is performed by the Kalarikurup community of the Cochin State as a ritualistic art. There are between fifty to sixty participants. It is said that Cheraman Perumal popularised Thullal.

A Kalam called ‘Bhagavathi Kalam’ is painted in front of the temples. The performer wears ‘Kacha’ and bells round his waste, and gingling anklets. He has a curved sword in his hand. He addresses the audience as if possessed by the Devi and issues commands. The art is performed at noon and midnight. The musical instruments used are nanduni, thudi, bronze plate and chenda. Another style of this performance is as follows:-

A pandal, decorated with flowers, tender coconut bunches etc. is arranged. Beneath the pandal, a Kalam is drawn in different colours using rice powder, charcoal powder, turmeric powder etc. For sometime the dancer dances outside the Kalam. When the dancer reaches the climax, the dancer jumps into the Kalam and erases the Kalam with his dance.
Theyyam is a sophisticated dance form more common in North Kerala. A sub division of Theyyam is known as ‘Thira’. ‘Thira’ is a representation of the past heroes. It is performed by certain particular communities called Vannan, Malayan, Velan, Pulayan etc. This is also a ritualistic art.

Theyyam has a tradition of nine centuries. Dancers, singers, instrumentalists, etc. are specially trained for the performance. The common features of Theyyam are given below:-

(1) The performer who takes the major role wears a silk round his waist, a small crown on his head and accompanied by instrumentalists goes to the front of the Devi temple. Then he sings what is known as ‘Thottam’, which describes the theme of this play.

(2) After the ‘Thottam’ the theyyam figure dons his full dress. This includes the head gear and various types of ornaments.

(3) The next stage is getting into the spirit of the real character the performer represents. Then the performer becomes possessed and the dance he then performs is called ‘Urayal’.
(4) The next stage is ‘Thirunottam’ followed by dance. This includes uriyattu and ‘Kurikodukkuka’. The devotees narrate their woes and the Theyyam makes oracular utterances to assuage the devotees’ woes.

(5) The last stage is the removal of the head gear.

In the temples of North Kerala the performance takes place from the Malayalam month of Thulam and then goes on till the month of Edavam. Where there are no temples, temporary temples are set up near small forests called ‘Kavus’. Theyyam is the first type of art where elaborate facial make-up called ‘mukathezhuthu’ is adopted. Masks are also used. In North Kerala there are about One Hundred and Fifty Theyyams.

15. PADAYANI

Padayani is also a famous ritualistic entertainment prevalent in Central Travancore.

Each character is called a Kolam, Kalan Kolam, Bhairavikolam etc. and wares palas (arecanut fronds) made into head gears (Thoppy). The dancing steps are very broad and several types of gestures are used. Between the dances there are dialogues and short scenes. The characters lend a theatrical quality
to the whole performance. At least a dozen performers are needed for Padayani. After the performance there is a procession of all the participants in the light of torches made by dried coconut leaves. The whole theme centres round the victory of Kali over the Asura called Darika.

16. PARICHA MUTTU KALI

This is practised in the District of Palghat, Malappuram, Ernakulam and Kottayam. The peculiarity of this performance is that this is a community dance. Persons of all age groups participate in it. There is a martial element in this dance. Paricha is a weapon used as a shield in a sword fight. The participants number six to sixteen persons. They are under a leader called asan meaning guru.

The performance is like this. Fully dressed performers carrying swords and shields encircle the asan. Standing in the centre the asan sings to the tinkling of hand bells. Then the performers repeat the songs. The duration of the performance is three to six hours. Parichamuttukali is performed in temples and during auspicious occasions like marriages etc.
17. **POOTHAM KALI**

This form of art is popular in Malabar in general and in Malappuram District in particular. A community called Mannan performs this. The age of the participants is from eighteen to forty-five. Three persons are necessary for this programme. They dance to the rhythm of thudi. The dance begins in slow tempo and ends in quick movements. Masks made of wood are used. The performance is very short that is fifteen minutes. Both day and night are suited for this performance. Pootham Kali is performed at Devi Temples from January to March every year as an offering to the Goddess.

18. **POORA KALI**

This is a dance form popular in the Kannur District of Kerala. This is also a ritualistic dance performed in Devi Temples. Normally farmers, weavers, fishermen are the artists in this performance. Songs in different tunes and rhythms and demonstrations of physical exercises mark the performances. There are well-defined stages for the performances. Formerly this was presented without any musical instrument. But later chenda, perumpara, cymbals conch, and Nagaswaram began to be used. The duration of the play is twentyfour hours.
19. **BHAGAVATHY PATTU**

This is a visual art performed in Brahmin households and temples of Central Kerala. Members of a particular casts called Kuruppan are the exponents of this art. The character called Velichappadu leads the troupe.

The performance starts with drawing of 'Kalam' by the Kurupanmars. Then songs in praise of the Devi are sung. For this a separate stage known as 'paattukottil' is set. Then there is a narration of events in musical form. After that the Velichapadu enters and dances round the Kalam. Then the Velichappadu speaks like an oracle and commands the devotees in the name of the Goddess. After this the show ends. Chenda, cymbal and veena are used as accompaniments for the song.

20. **MARGAM KALI**

Margam Kali is a kind of dance popular among the Christian community in Central Travancore. This is performed during marriage and other social functions as well as during the festival. There is no age limit and both men and women participate in the dance. Twelve persons are present in this art. They stand in a circle around a lamp, burning eleven wicks to represent Christ.
The twelve performers, with the tail feathers of the peacock represent the disciples of Christ.

The first part of the dance is performed to the accompaniment of songs. The second part is a sort of martial art somewhat similar to parichamuttukali in which swords and shields are used. The theme usually is the life of Saint Mathew. No musical instruments are used. The time of performance is after dusk and the duration is three to four hours. The costume is of the traditional Christian community type.

21. MUDIYETTU

This is presented at Bhadrakali temples in Travancore Cochin region. Only two communities namely Kuruppanmars in Travancore and Maranmars in Cochin have the right to perform this art. The theme of the dance is the fight between Bhadrakali and Daruka. A minimum of sixteen persons is needed for Mudiyettu. They are either characters on the stage or those performing in the back ground. The drawing of the ‘Kalam’, songs in praise of the Deity, passing a lighted torch all over the body, ‘Kolam maikal’ (erasing the Kolam) are the usual components of this dance. In certain ‘kalsams’ a Sudarsana Chakra of Lord Vishnu is also drawn with the usual materials used for colouring.
An important part of the performance is ‘Keli’ which means an overture of dreams. Then there is a ritual called ‘arangu vazhthal’. This is followed by the entry of Darika and then the entry of Kali. Koodiyattom is actually the fight between Darika and Kali. The play ends with the Kalasamkottal. Chenda and Cymbals are the instruments used. A pandal with pillars as in Kadhakali and a curtain are used to evoke suspense among the audience. Another important characteristic is ‘uduthukettu’ (taking the end of the loin cloth between the legs to be tucked up behind). The costumes have resemblance with those worn by Chakiars for Chakiar Koothu.

22. VILLADICHAN PATTU

This is very popular in the Neyyattinkara Taluk and neighbouring areas in Thiruvananthapuram District. This is supposed to be the monopoly of the Nadar Community of South Travancore. This is a ritual as well as an entertainment. At least five persons are required for this. Usually the songs are in praise of a particular deity.

A big bow with adorned bells, and a bow string is placed before the singers. While singing the songs the main singer strikes at the string of the bow in a rhythm suited to the song.
To add strength to the rhythmatic effect other instruments like Dolak, Tabla etc. are used. The participants wear a towel round their heads.

23. VELA KALI

Vela Kali is a ritualistic art of a martial character. There is a symbolic reference to the Mahabharata war. About fifty persons take part in this group dance. They dress like soldiers. The steps are war like steps and the gestures are also those of soldiers. This is also performed on the steps of the temple pond. Thus it got the name 'Kulathil vela'. Tavil, Sudha Maddalam, Cymbals, Horns and Trumpets are the instruments used for background music. The players have soldier-like dresses and they hold shields in the left hand and a sword (cane) in the right hand.

It is believed that Vela Kali emerged as a martial art form at Ambalapuzha and the local Raja called the Chempakasseri Raja and a family called ‘Mathur Panicker’ family used to maintain their own family troupes.

24. SARPAM THULLAL

The main part of this art form is Thullal or dance. It is popular all over Kerala. Usually Sarpamthullal is the art of the
pulluvas. The purpose is to propitiate the serpents. Normally Kumaris (girls who have not attained puberty) are only allowed to take part in Sarpam Thullal. The number is limited to five. In this dance also there is a ‘Kalam’ in which the representation of a twirling serpent with raised hood is drawn. Near the Kalam two young girls sit with wet clothes after the bath. They hold arecanut flowers in their hands. The Pulluvars play on the veena and their women play on the ‘Kudam’. The song is very attractive and is supposed to propitiate the serpent God. Just as the Velichappadu becomes possessed pulluvars ask various questions to the girls and the girls reply to them. Most often the girls also dance and tired of the dance fall down. They are nursed by others and it takes a long time for them to recover consciousness. Songs on themes from Mahabharatha and the tale of Vinatha and Kadru are sung. The Pulluvars roam about from house to house with their veena and it is believed that the Pulluvan Pattu wards of evil from the family.

25. SANGHA KALI

Sangha Kali is also known as Pannan Kali, yatrakali and Chathirakali. It is the Namboothiris known as Chathirars who performed this dance in groups. Each group has its own leader
and its own deity. This is a social art performed during ceremonious occasions like upanayanam, wedding, annaprasanam etc. The following are the rituals involved in this:-

(1) Shouting to the background provided by beating copper pots.

(2) Singing of chollal songs to the accompaniment of percussion instruments.

(3) The entry of Edakandapan and his acting and singing.

(4) The entry of other characters in disguise.

(5) The meeting between Prakajam and oaothikan.

(6) The taking up of arms

(7) Dancing in group

Chenda, Maddalam and Cymbals are the instruments used. The stage is set in the middle of the audience. Lighting is provided by nilavilakku and torches. Special type of dresses like long upper garments, loin cloth are used. Face masks are also used. Costumes differ from character to character.

(List of all the folk arts is appended Appendix...III........)
3. Music in folk Songs

The musical patterns of folk songs have a genre of their own. The notes are sung plainly and without any ornamentation. The reach of the tunes are limited. So it is not possible to relate these tunes to any fixed raga of Karnatik music. A few songs have only four notes. The compass of many songs touches the upper tetrachord of the lower octave, and the lower tetrachord of the middle octave. Most of the songs are in two lines or in four lines. Only songs of the later periods have pallavi, Anupallavi, Charana structure.

The following characteristics of folk songs are of particular interest:-

(1) Their range is limited to one another generally.

(2) 'Prati Madhyamam' is very rarely used.

(3) Literature is simple, but poetic.

(4) The themes are taken from ordinary life.

(5) The music is simple, has a homely and nostalgic character, but it appeals to the feelings of ordinary people and can be enjoyed by even untrained ears.
(6) Sangathis, gamakas etc. are absent.

(7) The time-measures are also simple.

(8) The ragas used in the folk songs resemble the following ragas:-

(1) Punnagavarali
(2) Nadhanamakriya
(3) Anandabhairavi
(4) Saindhavi
(5) Kurinji
(6) Navaraj
(7) Sankarabharanam (upto a certain range)
(8) Mayamalavagoula (Do)
(9) Chakravakam (Do)
(10) Harikamboji