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Kaṭṭaikkūttu's Performance Spaces

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I would like to see myself as a facilitator/instigator who likes to go against the grain, and a self-made manager, dramaturg and costume designer who has helped establish the Kattaikkuttu Sangam and Gurukulam. Both these institutions were part of a dream my life partner – Kattaikkuttu actor, playwright and director P. Rajagopal – had to bring about greater cooperation among his fellow performers and to offer rural, disadvantaged children like himself access to theatre training and education under the same roof so as to build a new generation of well-trained and educated Kattaikkuttu performers.

Having trained in Indology at the University of Leiden, I use my academic knowledge and skills to advocate for the cause(s) of the Sangam, the theatre and its professional rural performers. I am passionate about enabling girls and young women to participate in what was once a male-only theatre tradition, alleviating the stigma on women performers and ensuring that they, too, can make their voices heard on and off stage. It is a privilege to have worked together with Sue Rees who has been pivotal in documenting the theatre and the growth of our work. This essay is a tangible outcome of our years' long collaboration across the oceans.



HANNE M. DE BRUIN

WITH SUE REES

I have always combined my academic thinking with practical work. When Rajagopal and I founded the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam I decided to leave academia after completing several different post-docs. I was disappointed with the academic discourse and the narrowness of my own discipline – so rich but apparently unwilling to go beyond the conventional textual and classical traditions into performance – and the seeming impossibility of making the academic meet real life. 'Interweaving' was my re-engagement with academia in a way that made sense to me; the Center provided me with physical and brain space to reflect on Kattaikkuttu's status within the wider knowledge field and the practical work (and its political entanglements) I have been involved in, including new productions; most importantly, it allowed me to be part of vibrant discussions with fellow Fellows from different backgrounds and performance cultures – something that I have missed terribly throughout my lonely academic career and something that fed into my own experiences and frustrations, triggering new ideas and new writing, such as this essay.

Sue Rees first met Hanne M. de Bruin and P. Rajagopal and the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam and Sangam in 2002. Since then she has witnessed and documented the opening of their centre in 2006, two national festivals, many overnight performances and has seen 5-year-old students grow into adulthood, sometimes leave the school and then return or go on to other chapters in their lives. It has been a wonderful journey. A documentary on P. Rajagopal is in the final stages, and, beyond the documentation projects, she designed animations for their performance of *The Milky Ocean*, Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai, India in 2006, and the lights and staging for the Karnatic Kattaikkuttu Tour, 2018–2019. She has received grants and commissions from a number of sources, including a Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence Awards – Research Grant 2016–2018 to undertake research at the Kattaikkuttu Sangam, Ayyangarkulam, Tamil Nadu, India.

Kaṭṭaikkūttu's Performance Spaces



■ P. Rajagopal as Karna from the play *Karṇa Mokṣham*, 2019.

¹ The theatre is also known by the name *Terukkūttu* or simply *Kūttu*. For a discussion about the name of the theatre, which has been the subject of debate, see de Bruin 2000.

KATṬAIKKŪTTU

Kaṭṭaikkūttu is a rural, Tamil-language-based form of total theatre that emphasizes the heroic. Its theatrical performances transmit aesthetic, cultural and social information that reveals and comments upon how rural, non-Brahmanical Tamil society imagines itself. Live performances resonate with the social, cultural and religious contexts in which they take place. By interacting with a wider corpus of narratives, images, symbols, beliefs and values, they allow rural spectators to create their own associations and interpretations and to make sense of such performances.

Kaṭṭaikkūttu is a predominantly oral theatre tradition, the origin and development of which has not been documented and whose performance 'texts', therefore, do not show up in any concrete detail in the annals of Tamil theatre and literary or dramatic history. Its flexible use of multimedial 'building blocks', within a relatively fixed framework underlying an overnight performance, allows performers to assemble unscripted, eight-hour-long live performance events. Kaṭṭaikkūttu's flexibility and potential

for improvisation appear to originate in the fact that its traditional performers, while entertaining wider audiences, could not afford to ignore the demands of their local patrons with regard to the nature and conditions of the performance (for example, choice of play to be performed, casting, space, duration, ritual obligations and remuneration), nor could they 'speak up' for fear of social consequences. Their low position within a rural, feudal caste hierarchy made it necessary to attune their performances to the expectations of their principal patrons and spectators (De Bruin 1999: 56–57 and *passim*). Even though Kaṭṭaikkūttu has become part of a wider rural, yet still informal, performance market, this situation persists as performers do not want to antagonize patrons for fear of putting future performance opportunities at risk.

The theatre derives its name from the fact that its principal characters wear the distinctive *kaṭṭai* ornamentation.¹ *Kaṭṭai* is a technical term that refers to ornaments made out of wood of the Indian coral tree; *kūttu* means theatre. The *kaṭṭai* ornamentation is conventionally said to consist of thirty-two parts which are decorated with mirrored shapes, the golden ridges of which stand out and depict, among other things, flower patterns and parrots. *Kaṭṭai* ornamentation includes different types of crowns, ear ornaments, shoulder ornaments, breast ornaments and swords signalling the royalty and valour of



■ (right) Curtain being held cross the down stage in anticipation of the main characters entrance. From a *kattaikkuttu* performance of *The Royal Sacrifice* 2018

a character. Characters wearing *kaṭṭai* ornaments are referred to as *kaṭṭai vēṣams*. They are larger-than-life, usually male persona, who display a distinct, heroic stage behavior. Adorned with spectacular costumes and mask-like makeup, *kaṭṭai vēṣams* enter the ground-level performance area behind a hand-held curtain using a set routine of songs and highly energized movements that help an actor-singer transition into his or her role. Overnight Kaṭṭaikkūttu performances are punctuated by these expressive curtain entrances (*tirai pravēṣam*) through which each character introduces himself before engaging with the unfolding dramatic plot. Curtain entrances are structured, high-intensity events that are greatly anticipated by rural spectators because they provide them with a first impression of how an actor will interpret and execute a familiar role.

Kaṭṭaikkūttu performances start at about 10 p.m. and last until 6–7 a.m. the next morning. They integrate music with linguistic, sung and spoken text, movement and acting. There is no strict separation between music/singing, acting and dance/choreography; all these elements work together to produce the whole. In other words, the interweaving of Kaṭṭaikkūttu's multiple media is a natural 'given' that local spectators take for granted. The organic nature of this multimodality is quite different from the devised multimodality in contemporary Western performances that purposefully select and combine audio, video, visual artworks and computer-generated images in order to create a performance piece (de Bruin 2019: 60).

Kaṭṭaikkūttu's repertoire focuses on episodes from the epic *Mahābhārata* and, to a lesser extent, selected *purāṇa* stories, both of which provide ample scope for exploring the heroic. Kaṭṭaikkūttu's *Mahābhārata* renderings interpret the dramatic plots of plays to fit local customs and perceptions emphasizing, for instance, family relationships, caste and customary marriage and funeral rites. I have referred to the translation of the epic narrative into local situations and concepts as a process of 'localization' (de Bruin 1999: 284–301). Localization could be seen as an example of interweaving that contributes to making performances topical, relevant and meaningful; it allows spectators to recognize their own tensions and dilemmas acted out

on the stage. Alf Hiltebeitel has observed that Kaṭṭaikkūttu performers and audiences view the *Mahābhārata* in terms of 'a royal family feud among *pañkālīs* (co-sharers) over the rights of inheritance' (Hiltebeitel 1988: 399 as quoted in de Bruin 1999: 314). This familial nature is reflected in the fact that epic characters address each other with terms that follow the pattern of a Tamil joint family, such as grandpa (*tātā*), older or younger brother (*aṇṇā/tampi*), maternal uncle (*māmā*) etc.. The familial nature of the dramas is furthermore intensified by the pivotal role that women play in the development of the narratives. This offers the possibility of bringing out hidden tensions and discords that are inherent to an extended family system – a theme to which local audiences can easily relate (de Bruin 1999: 314). In the case of the epic hero Karna, Kaṭṭaikkūttu performances seek to highlight Karna's status as a person of low caste. While the classical Tamil and Sanskrit versions do not dwell on the theme of caste, the impact of caste on society and one's life is part of the reality of Kaṭṭaikkūttu's rural stakeholders. Karna is the illegitimate son of Princess Kunti, who abandoned him as a baby. He is found and adopted by a (low caste) charioteer in the service of the king on the enemy side; therefore, the fact that Karna is of royal descent is unknown to the outside world. Karna's perceived low caste marks the entire course of his tragic life and scars his soul: as a youngster he is excluded from the final royal contest of the princes with whom he trained in weapons. His wife Ponnuruvi does not respect him for she feels that she has been forced into a *déclassé* marriage. In the final devastating fraternal war, Karna ends up on the wrong side of the family feud and is killed by his half-brother, who is unaware of their relationship (de Bruin 1998).

Karna's Death (Karna Mōkṣam) is an all-night play that a family can commission when they have lost a loved one. They do so in the hope that the person who has died will ultimately reach *mōkṣam* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth), just as Karna does in the play. Appropriate to the occasion, the performance has multiple references to death and dying. These include interpretations of local sayings and customs as well as humorous asides that emphasize death as the great equalizer: for whether you are a king or

a villager, the funeral rites for both are exactly the same. The storyline also features a series of bad omens not found in the literary versions of the epic, in addition to a sequence of Karṇa's wife's dreams, both of which point to Karṇa's impending death on the battlefield (de Bruin 1999: 290–292). Toward the end of the play, family members will come onstage to participate in the funeral rites that mark Karṇa's, and simultaneously the deceased person's, passing on (see image): here actual reality and reality created in and through performance coincide.

Traditionally, Kaṭṭaikkūttu was the prerogative of male performers who played both male and female characters; more recently, women have been initiated in Kaṭṭaikkūttu as the result of the vision and advocacy of P. Rajagopal. Rajagopal is a fourth-generation descendent of a family that has been traditionally involved in Kaṭṭaikkūttu. He left school when he was 10 in order to become a professional child-actor in his father's theatre company. After a career stretching over forty years, during which he was one of the leading regional actors specializing in *kaṭṭai* characters, he began directing and writing plays that explore Kaṭṭaikkūttu's rich dramatic vocabulary.² In 1990, he co-founded the Kaṭṭaikkūttu Sangam, a grassroots organization that promotes the interests of professional Kaṭṭaikkūttu actors and musicians.³ In 2002, Rajagopal established the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam, a unique residential theatre school administered by the Sangam. The Gurukulam enabled girls and young women to participate in professional Kaṭṭaikkūttu training and onstage performances on a par with boys and young men, while simultaneously receiving a foundational education and comprehensive care.⁴

² See Rajagopal 2005 and 2014 for his published plays.

³ See www.kattaikkuttu.org

⁴ The Gurukulam was forced to close its doors in March 2020 as the Covid-19 pandemic made its work impossible.

Go to <https://bit.ly/38wHQjz> to see video edits of Kattaikkuttu Theatre performances from 2002 to the present day



Family members participating in the family rites for Karṇa, from a performance of *Karṇa Mokṣam*.



THIS ESSAY

The essay focuses on the complex relationship between performance spaces and Kaṭṭaikkūttu performances in rural and urban contexts. In it we attempt to unravel how processes of interweaving – of location and performance, of performers and spectators, of epic and local context and of two different performance forms: Kaṭṭaikkūttu and Karnatic concert music – impact on the sense of ownership of a performance. In the first part of the essay we highlight village locations in the northern parts of Tamil Nadu, and, within these villages, the specific spaces where regular, overnight Kaṭṭaikkūttu performances happen. A performance space may be a cross-roads of village streets, an open area opposite or adjacent to a village temple, a *tōppu* (tope or orchard with an open space), a piece of farmland just harvested, or a (narrow) street in a provincial town lined on both sides with houses (and sometimes a gutter). The images of rural performances featured in the essay show the Kattaikkuttu Young Professionals Company (KYPC) at work at different locations and in different configurations between 2012 and 2019. The KYPC was the mixed-gender repertory company of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam. At the time of these performances, the members of the Company were between 14 and 22 years old. All performers of the Company had been tutored in the art of Kaṭṭaikkūttu acting and singing by Rajagopal.

The second part of the essay focuses on *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu*, an experimental collaboration interweaving Kaṭṭaikkūttu theatre and Karnatic concert music. The fact that these two performance genres, whose practitioners occupied different social and cultural worlds, interacted on the same stage was a political statement that challenged the conventions of the Indian cultural establishment (see, for example, de Bruin 2019: 51; Chanda-Vaz 2019; Hasan 2019). *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu* was a two-hour production conceptualized by P. Rajagopal, Karnatic vocalists T. M. Krishna and Sangeetha Sivakumar, and theatre scholar Hanne M. de Bruin. It premiered in Mumbai in 2017 and subsequently saw five more performances in 2018 and 2019 at the Serendipity Festival in Goa, the Kochi Biennale, the Rangashankara Theatre in Bangalore, the lawns of the Prince of Wales

Museum in Mumbai and Kalakshetra in Chennai. The only rural performance was in August 2018, when *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu* was performed at the half-open auditorium of the Kattaikkuttu Sangam as part of its annual performing arts festival. The production was commissioned by Devina Dutt and Sue Rees was the technical director.

This essay describes regular, rural overnight Kattaikkuttu performances – their location, performance and audience spaces – and contrasts these with the location and spaces in which *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu* happened. The images and video footage visually and aurally show aspects of these performances and performance spaces that are difficult to convey in words. By juxtaposing Kattaikkuttu performances in these two very different contexts we want to highlight the complex ways in which locations and spaces, and the people that inhabit them, interweave with the very substance of performance. Not only do different spaces impact on the aesthetics of a performance, they also allow artists, spectators and patrons to ascertain ownership of these performances in different ways and to different degrees.

RURAL PERFORMANCE SPACES

Performance area and seating arrangements

Spatial arrangements for performances in villages and quarters of small, provincial towns are temporary, while their specific location and direction (facing either west or north) are dictated by convention. Rajagopal used his experience and extensive network of contacts across villages to tactfully negotiate minor adjustments in the dimension and surface of the performance area that the KYPC was offered upon arrival. However, he knew well that most of the times his patrons would be unwilling to exchange a traditional location of a performance for a bigger space, which could have better accommodated the KYPC's large cast and benefitted the quality of the performance, because this would have upset the existing social status quo in the village. It is part of the job of Kattaikkuttu performers to 'fit' their performances into whatever rural space they are offered without complaining about it. In recent times, communal open grounds and *tōppus* in provincial towns, where performances used to be



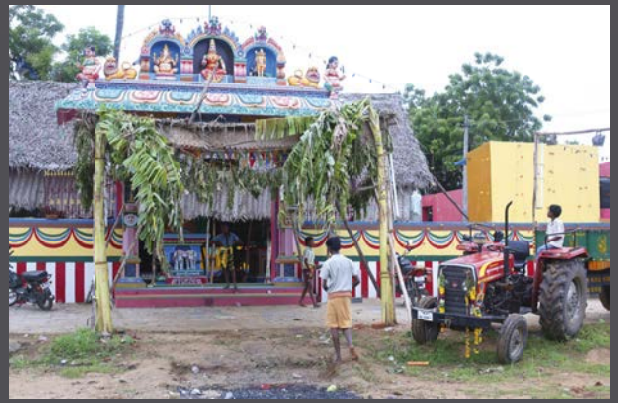
held, have diminished in size or have disappeared altogether, either because the land has been sold off, used to build a school, or has been encroached upon by shops and new, larger, modern houses (using steel and concrete) that replace older tiled houses with mud walls. Not only has it become more difficult to find such large open spaces where performances could be held, many village streets in which performances now happen have cement surfaces, which takes a toll on the performers' feet and joints.

The performance area is usually ground-level and its dimensions vary from 15-by-15 feet to about 20-by-20 feet. Some villages may have a more permanent, elevated stage made out of caked mud or concrete, as in the case of Kulamanthai Village featured here. Other villages may hire a 'scene company' to construct a boarded proscenium stage with a canopy (see for an example of such a canopy the images of Onkur Village). Provided that the location allows for this, spectators sit ground-level on three sides around the performance area, as well as on elevated places such as doorsteps and roofs of nearby houses – women often separate from men, while children occupy the front rows and young men may stand or hang around the outer edges of the spectators' seating area. Elderly people may bring a chair to sit on and watch the performance, while patrons and higher-ranking guests (including researchers when invited) might sit for some time onstage, either on the bench meant for the actors or on a chair that has been brought in for them.

■ Pre-performance negotiations.

Go to <https://bit.ly/3vhdPxV> to see video edits from Karnatic Kattaikkuttu an experimental collaboration interweaving Kattaikkuttu theatre and Karnatic concert music.





Kaṭṭaikkūttu Performance of Dakṣya Yagam

12°19'42.39"N 79°46'43.68"E
elev 88ft

Onkur Village, Tamil Nadu
27th – 28th July 2013

Entire overnight performance of Dakṣya Yagam
at Onkur Village, Tamil Nadu, India 2013.
https://youtu.be/zv_QGr800hA





Kattaiikküttu Performance of *Daksya Yagam*

12°35'58.63"N 79°34'42.98"E elev 313ft

Kulamanthai Village, Tamil Nadu

21st – 22nd July 2013

Entire overnight performance of *Daksya Yagam* at Kulamanthai Village, Tamil Nadu, India 2013. <https://youtu.be/K-t3KNr5D1E>



■ (opposite page) Onkur performance through to sunrise, and post. Performance commissioned by the late Mr Ravi temple priest in conversation with P. Rajagopal

■ (this page) Kulamanthai performance. Performance commissioned by the village for the annual Mariyamman festival celebrating the planting of rice. Kattiyakkāran on stage, audience and processional icon of goddess placed in the background so that she can watch the performance, arriving, stage during and after performance.

Audience



string lights etc





■ Wiring flood lights and fluorescent tubes from the grid prior to a *kaṭṭaikkūttu* performance of *Dice and Disrobing* 2008.



The lighting of the stage generally consists of two 500-watt bulbs or focus lights suspended between two poles at the front of the stage. Stage lighting may include also a few fluorescent tubes attached to the poles on the front or back of the stage. The stage lighting is done by the local electrician, who often wires the lights directly into the main overhead line. The availability of electricity is not guaranteed, and power cuts may disrupt the progress of the performance. Nowadays, some villages hire a generator as a power backup, but this is not always the case. Areas surrounding the performance space and audience seating areas may display intricate images of deities made of (flashing) string lights, whilst the processional icon of the deity is adorned with similar light decorations. The performance space is separated from the green room by a curtain brought along by the theatre company. Suspended across the upstage area is a banner that states the name of the company, its location, the name of its principal performer(s) and proprietor. Centre backstage there are two wooden benches, one for the musicians to sit on and one for the actors, in addition to a chair (wood or plastic) for the harmonium player.

■ (right) Street setting of a *kaṭṭaikkūttu* performance of *The Royal Sacrifice*, Cheyyar Village, Tamil Nadu, India 2018 showing lighting, back curtain and audience members.

Green room

The back side of the performance space leads into the green room, which has entries/exits left and right connecting it to the stage. The green room is created for the occasion out of palm leaf thatch or, nowadays increasingly, discarded plastic sheets used on billboards or fertilizer bags. The green room has a single, low-hanging bulb and a brass oil lamp to provide actors with sparse light to put on their facial make-up, while its surface is covered with straw or, again, plastic sheets (see images). This space is reserved for the performers and their luggage (bundles of costumes and musical instruments all foldable and transportable), but patrons and other curious spectators often drop in to participate in the pre-performance worship (*pūjā*), or to get a glimpse of the make-up or the process of actors getting into costume. Performers may gently push out the youngest of these onlookers when their curiosity impedes their work. However, as invited guests to the village they are not in a position to impose a strict rule of 'no entry', signalling the feeling of ownership that villagers have with regard to the performance.

Ownership of the performance

The set-up of a typical, rural performance area facilitates an intimate relationship between performers and spectators that contributes to the latter's sense of ownership of *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performances. Not only do they, or a group of village people on their behalf, commission a theatre company of their liking and affordability, they pay collectively for a performance, set up the performance area and





offer local hospitality to the visiting actors and musicians, in addition to having a say in which play will be performed. Most importantly, the performance is theirs because it takes place on their *soil*. Anthropologist E. Valentine Daniel has highlighted how in Tamil culture the soil of one's birth village contributes to defining personhood. According to him, personhood is never isolated nor individuated, but always understood in context. A person absorbs into their being the substance or quality of the soil of their *conta ūr* – that is, the village of their birth – and so do other village members, contributing to there being an interconnected and interdependent community (Daniel 1984: 61-104). To show the association with their place of birth, people often attach the first letter or the entire name of their village to their own names, even when they no longer live in their *ūr*. For instance, Rajagopal is often referred to as Perungattur P. Rajagopal, in which Perungattur is the village of his birth and P. the initial of his father, Ponnusami. The importance of location and community also shows in the convention that villagers were not supposed to cross the boundaries of their village for the duration of a religious festival.

The concept of *ūr* proposed by Daniel seems to exclude the area of members of the scheduled castes (SC) – that is, the former Untouchables who fall outside the official caste system. While the habitat of the scheduled castes carries the same name as the caste village or *ūr*, somewhat ironically it is often referred to in colloquial Tamil by the English term 'colony'. Thus, Perungattur village has three bus stops: two for the *ūr* and one for Perungattur Colony, which is an entity in its own right that is geographically separate from the *ūr*. Rajagopal tells me that in his father's

time, Kattaiikkuttu performances did happen occasionally in SC habitats. Nowadays this is increasingly the case as the result of the social and economic emancipation of the Scheduled Castes and perhaps also because members of these communities have entered the Kattaiikkuttu profession since it ceased to be a traditional caste occupation.

During Rajagopal's father's time, the SC patrons of a performance would ensure that the customary pre-performance dinner would be cooked and served in a house in the *ūr* before the performers moved into the performance space situated in the SC habitat. This is no longer the case.⁵ However, an unwritten convention, which dictates that spectators arriving from the Colony sit down on the side of the performance area closest to the direction from which they came so as to avoid mingling with other castes, remains intact in some villages. Clearly, interweaving – here of audience seating locations and of bodies marked by caste/no caste, gender and age – is not a process that is equal for all; as such it throws light on the opposite movement of separation too.

Ownership of the performance manifests itself visually in the fact that spectators may walk into the performance space while the performance is in full swing to offer a monetary gift or a shawl (*anpalippu*) to an actor whose performance they particularly like, or to the theatre company as a whole. The stage is not exclusively reserved for the performers, nor is it sacrosanct, in spite of the fact that performances often take place on sacral/religious occasions. Following Kattaiikkuttu's practice, a donation will be publicly acknowledged by the comedian, or another actor who is free and not in role, by stating the name of the donor and the amount (sometimes inflated to emphasize the donor's generosity). Customarily, the first donation received is given on behalf

■ (left) Street setting of a kattaikkuttu performance of *The Royal Sacrifice*, Cheyyar Village, Tamil Nadu, India 2018 showing lighting, back curtain and audience members.

⁵ Personal communication – P. Rajagopal speaking about Kattaiikkuttu in his father's and grandfather's times, 16 November 2020.



■ Green room showing actors preparing and applying make up.

■ A huge pole symbolizing Mount Kailasa, being climbed by Arjuna, Kaṭṭaikkūttu Theatre Festival 2005. Kaṭṭaikkūttu Sangam and Gurukulam, Kuttu Kalai Kudam, Punjarasantankal, Tamil Nadu, India.

of the entire village and it underlines the interdependent relationship between the village and the performers. In the case of Rajagopal's family's performance tradition, the leader of the company, if not yet in role, will appear onstage to acknowledge this donation with a conventional prose formula preceded by a *viruttam*, that is, a four- or eight-line melodic verse or invocation without a rhythm. The convention of making and acknowledging such donations is referred to as *koṇṭāṭṭam*, which could be freely translated as 'celebration'. In the *viruttam*, the leader of the company greets his audience, including the members of the four varnas (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras), liberal patrons and poets who might be present in this august assembly (*makācapai*, that is, the audience), saying that he has come before them to humbly receive the gifts they will bestow upon him. The *viruttam* is followed by a prose passage in which each sentence begins with the word *cupōjeyam*, 'eminent victory' (Sanskrit *śubhajeya*), announced loudly whilst the actor raises his hand with the donation. In formulaic prose he thanks all persons holding different positions in the village, including traditional ones, such as the village headman and village accountant, and more modern functions, such as the police, panchayat president and panchayat members. To this list he can add members of the festival committee that has extended the invitation to perform to him and, depending on the context, other important guests.

In addition to the announcement of gifts, the flow of an all-night performance might be interrupted to let the procession of a deity pass, usually accompanied by loud drumming and fireworks, or, as we saw already, to allow relatives of a deceased person who have commissioned the play *Karṇa Mōkṣam* to participate in the onstage performance of rites in memory of the person they have lost. At dramatically heightened moments in an overnight performance, such as the attempt to disrobe Draupadi, spectators may get engrossed to such an extent in the reality created in and through the performance that one of them might run into the performance area to try to prevent the staged action. In addition to being the heroine of the *Mahābhārata* epic, Draupadi is considered a local goddess



in rural Tamil Nadu, lending a performance event additional sensibility and power. At such moments, the performance area is the royal assembly, whilst the audience members surrounding it become kings, queens and princes watching the public humiliation of a woman. Village performances are put on for and are overseen by a deity, often a ferocious goddess such as Draupadi, or a goddess specific to the village (*kirāmatēvatā*). The goddess is believed to be responsible for the welfare and well-being of the village community on whose soil she resides. She has to be propitiated and her ambiguous sacral nature needs to be appeased. One way of doing so is to offer her a performance that neutralizes her dark forces whilst channeling her auspicious energy to serve the community. Kaṭṭaikkūttu performances unleash and harness the goddess's ambivalent and potentially violent energy. They are never simple forms of entertainment.

Off-stage performances

While patrons and spectators may walk into the performance space, conversely performers may step into the crowded audience arena. Peeling off

her saris and dragging them with him, Draupadi's opponent Duhsasana moves into the audience area, thereby making a visible representation of the endless stream of saris that the God Krishna granted Draupadi to protect her modesty (see also the images of the performance of this scene in *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu*). Towards the morning, performers may leave the performance area altogether. They move into the village, which subsequently becomes Mount Kailasa, where the hero Arjuna carries out an extreme penance to obtain a divine weapon that will help him and his brothers win the epic war. The mountain top is symbolized by a huge pole connecting heaven and earth. The climbing of the penance pole is the culmination of the all-night performance of *Arjuna's Penance* (*Arjuna Tapacu*). The play can be a stand-alone performance or a part of a much longer, ten- to twelve-night-long *Mahābhārata* village festival (image). Another example of an 'offstage' performance is the last day of such a festival. After an overnight performance enacting the events of the final day of the war, the last remaining survivor on the losing side, Duryodhana, leaves the stage area. As stipulated by the dramatic plot, he hides in a pond – here the actual village pond – in an attempt to escape his enemy and save his life. He is found and the final battle takes place at the centre of the village, where potters have created a huge, lying sand and mud figure of Duryodhana. During the unfolding battle his opponent hits the thigh of the statue instead of the actor-in-the-flesh, resulting in Duryodhana's death (image).

Performances on the occasion of a *Mahābhārata* festival connect epic space with physical locations beyond the area delineated for the performance



proper in order to encompass the entire village and thereby imbue the performance and these spaces with additional (sacral) meaning and 'life'. In this complex process of interweaving, the physicality of the *ūr* never entirely loses its specific characteristics. Rather, its very substance feeds into the substance of the performance, making every performance event unique, as well as locality specific, and endowing a rural audience, on whose behalf the performance has been commissioned, with a sense of ownership of the performance and its patrons with (a limited) agency to curate it in the way they want.

Comedy

In spite of the fact that the general mood of Kaṭṭaikkūttu performances is expansively heroic or harrowingly tragic, these events also contain hilarious comedy to offset heightened states of being that can potentially possess performers as well as members of the audience. Comedy is a pivotal element in all-night performances. It allows performers to comment on local society and, often obliquely, on current politics; it is also an instrument to (re-)engage rural audiences when their attention fades and sleep threatens to overtake them.

Comedy is the domain of the Kaṭṭiyakkāraṇ. In his formal function of guardian of the royal assembly, the Kaṭṭiyakkāraṇ announces and praises the greatness of mighty *kaṭṭai* characters – such as Dakṣya, Hiraṇya, Duryodhana, Karṇa, Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna – through a conventional, formulaic panegyric (*kaṭṭiyam*). The Kaṭṭiyakkāraṇ combines his role of herald with that of comedian. Most theatre companies employ a single Kaṭṭiyakkāraṇ, who is onstage – and, if not onstage, on call – for the entire duration of the performance. The overnight performances featured in this essay had two young, versatile Kaṭṭiyakkāraṇs. Both were students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam who, in addition to their Kaṭṭaikkūttu training, had trained with different professional guest teachers (who visited the school) to further develop their comic skills. Their extended training allowed new forms of comedy to enter the performance at different levels – linguistically, in terms of sound, and visually through their intertwined choreographies, body language and slapstick.

■ Statue of Duryodhana for the final day of a 10-night Mahabharata village festival in Paratam at Arcot town, 2015

Go to <https://bit.ly/3ctd0JE> to see short clips of clown acts from various overnight performances of the Kattaikkuttu Young Professional Company



■ End of performance of *Pakatai Tukil* at Marutam Village, 2016.



The Kaṭṭiyakkāraṅs are the first characters to appear on stage in every performance. They announce the title of the play that is going to be performed (and which until then is unknown to most audience members) and the name and location of the theatre company. In a customary disclaimer of performance, they request the spectators excuse them, and the actors that follow them, for any mistakes that they might make in the wording, music or rhythm, or any errors that they might commit unknowingly (De Bruin 1998: 12-13). The Kaṭṭiyakkāraṅs need to get the attention of an often unruly and noisy audience – not an easy job with new spectators arriving and trying to negotiate a place in the crowd by spreading a mat or a bunch of straw on the ground (and arguing with others when they feel insufficient space is left). They do so by hiking the tempo and volume of their performance, executing fast-moving choreographies, comic songs and competitive or otherwise entertaining dialogues in order to prepare the ground for the curtain entry of the first principal character – usually a *kaṭṭai* character (see images of the Kaṭṭiyakkāraṅs at work). Subsequent comedy emerges from the collaboration between such a heroic-royal protagonist and the comedians, who also respond to reactions in the audience. While this comedy is topical and involves interacting with an epic character or characters, the Kaṭṭiyakkāraṅs may also include comic episodes that have no connection whatsoever with the main storyline. This is often done to provide a *kaṭṭai vēṣam* with some rest during or after a physically demanding curtain entrance. For instance, during the entry of the 16-year-old

Abhimanyu (a male *kaṭṭai vēṣam* performed by a girl), the two comedians, using their sticks as a bat, produced a fast-paced humorous intermezzo in which they challenged each other to bowl and hit a cricket ball, highlighting absurd technical difficulties that had the audience in splits (see video of Abhimanyu 2013 in short clips of clown acts). Perhaps the young performers thought this scene would appeal to a 16-year-old (as it did to them), but their comedy had little to do with Abhimanyu's impending marriage plans in the play.

In the early hours of the next morning, the Kaṭṭiyakkāraṅs formally conclude the play, after which an auspicious song (*maṇkaḷam*) is sung by the remaining actors in role and on the stage (see image of conclusion of performance). However, by that time the audience has already started to get up and leave, gathering their mats and other belongings. There is no applause, and everybody reverts to everyday life as if the performance has never happened. The electrician switches off the power and starts taking apart the temporary wiring he has put up, while the performers in the green room remove their make-up and pack up their costumes and musical instruments. A few spectators linger on to see the leader of the company receive the performance payment (*ampakam*) from the patrons before the entire group leaves in two hired vans.

KARNATIC KATTAIKKUTTU

Karnatic Kattaikkuttu presented excerpts from two all-night *Mahābhārata* plays, *Disrobing of Draupadi* and *The Eighteenth Day* (which features Duryodhana attempting to save his life on the last day of the *Mahābhārata* war). At the centre of the programme was a unique musical dialogue between T. M. Krishna and P. Rajagopal. In this dialogue, they reflected on the different perceptions of Karnatic music and Kaṭṭaikkūttu through a series of songs focusing on what art is, caste, language and the specificities of each of these two Tamil performing art forms. The songs were interlaced and connected by informal conversation. In his perception of art, Rajagopal defined Kaṭṭaikkūttu as a form of hard labour, referring not only to the physical demands that Kaṭṭaikkūttu's fully embodied overnight

performances make on a performer's body, but also to the subservient position of Kaṭṭaikkūttu performers as members of the lower castes for whom performing was both a caste-based right and an obligation (de Bruin 1999: 61-63 and *passim*). Krishna responded by highlighting the fact that its predominantly high-caste Brahmin performers associate Karnatic concert music with beauty and spiritual wisdom that ostensibly comes into existence without relying on the (polluting) body of the performer. In doing so, both drew attention to the contrasting cultural and social topographies that Kaṭṭaikkūttu and Karnatic music, their practitioners and their audiences, inhabit (de Bruin 2019: 64-65). Their musical conversation was followed by a series of Sanskrit slokas describing the carnage on the battlefield performed by Krishna and Sangeetha Sivakumar. They were joined by the young Kaṭṭaikkūttu performers who presented a newly developed, contemporary choreography grounded in Kaṭṭaikkūttu's movement language and visually depicting the slaughter on the battlefield.

Karnatic Kattaikkuttu united two ensembles. In addition to Karnatic vocalists Krishna and Sangeetha, on the Karnatic side were instrumentalists Akkarai Subhalakshmi on violin, K. Arun Prakash on mridangam, and N. Guruprasad on ghatam. On the Kaṭṭaikkūttu side, Rajagopal brought onstage two senior performers: A. Kailasam and R. Kumar; they were joined by nine students from the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam, including three musicians: a harmonium player, a *mukaviṇai* (a small, high-pitched, oboe-like instrument) player, and a percussionist who played both the mridangam and dholak drums. The Karnatic and Kaṭṭaikkūttu ensembles were seated diagonally across from each other with Krishna and Sangeetha sitting stage front right, that is on the side of the Kaṭṭaikkūttu instrumentalists, and the Karnatic instrumentalists stage front left. In a separate essay I have discussed in greater detail what enabled the collaboration between Kaṭṭaikkūttu and Karnatic concert music, what the two forms had in common, and where they differed (de Bruin 2019). Suffice here to say that both forms share foundational musical ideas, technical vocabulary and conventions grounded in Karnatic music; both forms are orally transmitted, require

extensive training and memorization, in addition to informed listeners/spectators able to identify and appreciate the intricacies of the respective artistic expressions. Their differences lie in the purpose, application and production of music to create the distinct soundscapes of Karnatic concert music and Kaṭṭaikkūttu's theatrical performances. In the case of Kaṭṭaikkūttu, (vocal) music is only one of the multiple media that support the dramatic action and enable an actor-singer to enter into and embody a role. In the case of Karnatic, the purpose of a concert is to bring out the aesthetics of the music, whether vocal or instrumental. The Karnatic vocalist is not required to embody a character and during the concert remains seated onstage in a static position.

Voices, music and soundscapes

As we saw in the first part of this essay, Kaṭṭaikkūttu's rural outdoor performances take place under difficult, makeshift performance conditions. Audiences, seated closely packed around three sides of the ground-level performance area, are noisy, not to say disruptive. For a Kaṭṭaikkūttu actor-singer, a strong voice is pivotal to reach your spectators and keep their attention. In the case of Rajagopal's performance style, singing is open-throated and high-pitched, carrying the sound of the unamplified voice far in the stillness of the night. This kind of singing has a distinctive, emotional and raw quality enhanced by the musical repetition of the *mukaviṇai*, which contrasts with Karnatic's 'sophisticated' amplified voice. The introduction of microphones has lowered the pitch of singing in Karnatic concert music, resulting in contemporary urban audiences no longer being accustomed to hearing a high-pitched voice, in particular of a male singer (de Bruin 2019: 60). Karnatic singing is part of a form of art music that has been analyzed, systematized, politicized, urbanized and modernized over the past 200 years. In contrast, Kaṭṭaikkūttu has its roots in a rural feudal society, a situation that per force favoured flexibility over codification and systematization of its performances to fulfil as best as possible the demands of rural sponsors and audiences.

Providing the framework for the production, the vocal and instrumental music – and their relation to the two *Mahābhārata* episodes, as well as the

Go to
<https://bit.ly/38zzMhV> to
listen to a conversation
between T. M. Krishna and
P. Rajagopal as part of
Karnatic Kattaikkuttu.
Serendipity Arts Festival,
Goa, 20 December 2018



Go to
<https://bit.ly/3qB63LT> to
see the war scene with
verses from the Sanskrit
Mahābhārata sung by
T. M. Krishna and
Sangeetha Sivakumar and
dance piece. Karnatic
Kattaikkuttu Serendipity
Arts Festival, Goa, India
2018.





Edit from the extract of The 18th Day of the Mahābhārata War with Karnatic performers T. M. Krishna and Sangeetha Sivakumar, with Kattaikkuttu performers, P. Rajagopal in the role of Duryodhana on the last day of the war, and A. Kailasam as Kattiyakkaran.
<https://youtu.be/-H4eYi5Z-p0>



Excerpts from Disrobing of Draupadi followed by a Karnatic Kirtanai sung by T. M. Krishna and Sangeetha Sivakumar, Serendipity Arts Festival, Goa, India 2018.
<https://youtu.be/BRMWO1C2uGI>





■ (opposite page) Goa. Disrobing of Draupadi and sound and light check, green room
■ (this page) Kochi. Duryodhana (P. Rajagopal) crawling into the audience representing the battlefield, and sound check, staging, audience on three sides

transitions between them – were carefully planned and rehearsed. After getting to know each other’s ways of making music, and selecting and condensing Kaṭṭaikkūttu’s elaborate sung texts to fit a two-hour production, this planning involved figuring out where Kaṭṭaikkūttu’s singing should be highlighted and where Karnatic singing could be used to support the dramatic action. It also involved experimenting with the interweaving of the two forms – both of their vocal and instrumental music – resulting in the creation of new, more varied, nuanced and fuller soundscapes. This process involved sharing Kaṭṭaikkūttu’s sung repertoire between representatives of both forms (and occasionally the other way around). For instance, Sangeetha, accompanied by the violin, sang the Kaṭṭaikkūttu lyrics in a slow tempo to introduce Draupadi, while Kaṭṭaikkūttu actress S. Tamilarasi, as Draupadi, waited behind the curtain. During the rehearsals it became clear that Tamilarasi, for the next sequence, had to sing herself – she needed her voice to accomplish the transition into character. Such practical requirements were often what moved the performance more into a Kaṭṭaikkūttu mode, and at other moments more into a Karnatic mode, with both forms enhancing each other (de Bruin 2019: 62-63). Sharing also involved Kaṭṭaikkūttu’s convention of the repetition of a song line of a principal onstage actor, as happened between Rajagopal as Duryodhana and Krishna in the episode of *The Eighteenth Day*. As a Karnatic vocal uses a lower pitch, this had Krishna repeat Duryodhana’s lines in a lower pitch and in Karnatic style, while Rajagopal used both the higher and lower ranges.⁶ The emotional ‘interwovenness’ of their alternate singing deepened over the course of *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu*’s tour to different cities, with Krishna responding through his singing to Rajagopal’s actions on the stage and the other way around.

Karnatic Kattaikkuttu’s performance spaces

Karnatic Kattaikkuttu saw various stage configurations, from a conventional proscenium stage to an elevated stage created specifically for the occasion (Goa and Mumbai), to a re-configuration of the audience space into a performance space (Kochi). The production relied on the amplification of all performers, both

on the Karnatic side (which always uses microphones) and the Kaṭṭaikkūttu side (which normally is not amplified) – something that caused necessary technical adjustments, in addition to affecting the vocal and musical soundscapes of both forms. In the majority of the performances, actors, vocalists and musicians were separated from the audience by the stage and the front aisles, with differences in height being due to raked seating and the stage height. Two exceptions occurred: at the Kochi Biennale and at the Kattaikkuttu Sangam’s annual theatre festival. In Kochi, the existing stage was too small to accommodate the large cast of twenty performers, so we decided to move the entire performance into the audience area while inviting spectators to sit on the stage. This resulted in audience members being seated – on the half-round gallery as well as on the ground – on and around the area where the performance occurred, and with the performers playing ground-level in close proximity to the spectators. This arrangement allowed Duryodhana (played by P. Rajagopal), to crawl into the audience to hide from his enemy, as he would have done during an all-night village performance.⁷ Through this act he included the spectators in his performance, transforming them into the dead bodies of soldiers, horses and elephants laying scattered across the battlefield. At the Sangam’s half-open auditorium, no difference in levels occurred. The predominantly rural audience was seated ground-level or stood on three sides of the rectangular performance area trying to get a closer look at the Karnatic musicians, who usually remain aloof from their listeners/spectators.

The stage set-up of *Karnatic Kattaikkuttu*, although executed differently at different locations, was carefully planned, taking into account the requirements provided by the technical director in advance. All performances took place on well-lighted stages and depended on amplification to reach the spectators, thus making everything done and said on the stage visible and audible. Such performances work only because they are devised, directed and rehearsed so that they can be repeated in more or less exactly the same way. In contrast, Kaṭṭaikkūttu’s long-duration village performances are usually not rehearsed and are flexible. The theatre’s flexibility

⁶ Duryodhana (P. Rajagopal) during *The Eighteenth Day* and T. M. Krishna (as Krishna). Mumbai, India 2017. <https://bit.ly/3l7b91h>



⁷ Edit of overnight performance of *Karnatic Moksham* including traveling to the village, performance and leaving from March 2006. <https://bit.ly/2PZ8Qll>



allows well-trained performers to respond to and balance the demands of their patrons, the specific context, performance conditions (including space), audience volume (varying from fifty to 2,000) and their own physical constitution at the time of the performance.

CONCLUSION

Kaṭṭaikkūttu performances can be seen as examples of complex interweaving at different levels, including the use of multiple media, the ways in which the persona of an actor 'interweaves' or coincides with that of the character he embodies (to the extent that the division between self and acted other and between real and play at times becomes thin (de Bruin 2006)), and the way in which the substance of the location impacts on the medium of performance. Overnight performances are literally grounded in the soil of the village (*ūr*) or colony, a physical and emotional condition that contributes not only to defining locality, community and personhood within a Tamil cultural context but also to flowing over and interweaving with the substance of performance in that particular location and space. The spatial setting of overnight performances allows patrons and spectators to take ownership of the performances they commission, pay for and habitually consume, enjoy and criticize. The close proximity of performers and audiences and the fact that the boundaries between performance space and audience space are fluid and can potentially extend into the village proper, as during Kaṭṭaikkūttu offstage performances on the occasion of *Mahābhārata* festivals, allows for the interweaving of physical and epic locations and spaces; it allows performers to make their spectators part of the performance, be it as royals attending the king's audience, judges of Duryodhana's character (in the play *Karṇa Mōkṣam*) or as dead bodies (that is, sleeping members of the audience) strewn around the battlefield among which Duryodhana tries to hide.

Overnight performances are undulatory events in which dramatically and/or ritually heightened episodes alternate with less loaded episodes, humorous intermezzos and the relaxed banter

of the comedians. Consequently, the attention of audience members weaves in and out of the performance depending on what is occurring on the stage. It is not unusual for spectators to have a quick nap during an all-night performance in order to be woken up by a neighbour when the dramatic or comic action intensifies. In the case of overnight Kaṭṭaikkūttu performances at rural locations, ownership of the performance clearly rests more with the patrons and audiences on whose soil the performance takes place than with the performers who deliver it. Such ownership is demonstrated by the fact that spectators may walk into the performance area while the performance is in progress to make a donation or participate in the onstage rituals marking Karṇa's death. This is not to deny that well-known actor-singers do not have ownership of their own performances; they do, and their specific individual interpretations of well-known roles are highly appreciated by rural connoisseurs and are often an important motivation to invite the theatre company to which such a star performer belongs.

The historically subservient position of traditional Kaṭṭaikkūttu performers came to be reflected in the theatre's inherent flexibility, which allowed performers to adjust each and every performance event to the wishes of the village – a practice referred to as *kirāmatṭi iṣṭam* (de Bruin 1999: 56–57). People who are unfamiliar with the form may perceive Kaṭṭaikkūttu's inherent flexibility as a form of 'messiness' or 'bricolage'. Similarly, the absence of a proper stage and theatre structure,⁸ the fluid boundaries between performance space and audience space that allow for the movement of actors and spectators in both directions, the long duration of the performances that have no fixed beginning time and end-time, in addition to Kaṭṭaikkūttu's unamplified, 'loud' soundscape, are sometimes seen as signs of a lack of discipline and training in its rural stakeholders – signs that confirm their 'backwardness' and lack of (formal) education. Ironically, when applied to a Western theatre context, flexibility – as a specific form of improvisation – and a close proximity between actors and spectators are often considered desirable qualities that define a production as contemporary and that modern theatre directors

⁸ According to Bim Mason, outdoor performances and street theatre in Europe suffer from a similar prejudice: they are not considered proper theatre because the performances lack an official space and/or theatre building (Mason, as quoted in de Bruin 1999, 11, fn. 12).

strive after (for example, Pierce 1968: 147). Contemporary performance art, and in particular endurance performance art, has experimented with the effects of longer duration performances to gauge the ways in which audience members and practitioners receive and experience such events.

When Kaṭṭaikkūttu is taken out of its rural, overnight context and transplanted onto an urban (proscenium) stage for audiences unfamiliar with the theatre's actual and dramatic language, this results in a certain degree of distancing of performers, medium and spectators and, consequently, diminishes the spectators' ownership of the performance. The specific constellation of *Karnatic Kaṭṭaikkūttu's* performance spaces, in particular those with racked seating, reduced the proximity of performers and spectators and the possibility for their interaction. At the Kochi Biennale, this intimacy and a certain degree of ownership of the performance was partly restored when Rajagopal could crawl into the audience seated around the performance space. His action stirred spectators and elicited an immediate, audible response from the audience members (including people taking out their mobiles to video-record the moment) who otherwise tend to watch the performance in darkness and in silence.

Concurrent with Kaṭṭaikkūttu moving into these urban theatre spaces, which tend to separate spectators from the performers, Rajagopal and I experienced a greater control over the performance space. *Karnatic Kaṭṭaikkūttu* gave us access to high-tech facilities, a technical director and the support of five highly professional Karnatic co-creators and co-performers, in addition to sufficient time and funds to plan and rehearse the production. This enabling environment allowed us to experiment with a new Kaṭṭaikkūttu aesthetics – in terms of stage set-up, sound, visuals, dramaturgy and narrative interpretations – to bring out, or so we hoped, the theatre's emotional and physical staying power, its complexity, its raw beauty and humour, even to spectators unfamiliar with the form. As the accompanying images and video footage in this essay show, *Karnatic Kaṭṭaikkūttu's* aesthetics and performance spaces contrasted starkly with that of overnight rural performances.

Karnatic Kaṭṭaikkūttu was a collectively devised, directed and rehearsed production oriented primarily toward satisfying the expectations of urban audiences unfamiliar with Kaṭṭaikkūttu as a theatre form (but probably familiar with the codified musical language of Karnatic music). While Karnatic music and Kaṭṭaikkūttu theatre did interweave in the performance, and increasingly so toward the end of the tour, both forms also kept their own qualities: from the onset of our collaboration it had been clear that we did not want Kaṭṭaikkūttu to sound like Karnatic concert music or the other way round. As a participant in the making of the production, I believe that we were as careful as possible not to let one form dominate the other, in spite of their social, economic and cultural separateness. As makers we were also very clear that the purpose of the production was not to create a kind of fusion. T. M. Krishna articulates this in *The Hindu* newspaper of 14 February 2019 when he states that: 'It is not a fusion concert, but an artistic collaboration, where two diverse forms converse with each other, challenging many established notions while retaining the aesthetics of each style' (Ramani 2019). I know too little about Karnatic music to be able to say how the collaboration might have affected the music making of our Karnatic colleagues. However, the fact that five highly trained, well-known Karnatic singers and instrumentalists were physically present in the same performance space, willing and ready to work with their Kaṭṭaikkūttu colleagues over a number of rehearsals and performances, sharing performance know-how across these genres, was a form of interweaving at a personal and artistic level that, or so we hope, contributes to breaking down the social and imaginary barriers that divide the 'classical' from the 'folk' and impede the equal access of different genders to these artistic expressions.⁹

⁹ See, for example, Chanda-Vaz 2019.

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