

KERALA'S ANCIENT MIZHAVU DRUM: TRANSFORMATIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY

K. Sajith Vijayan [കലാമണ്ഡലം സജിത്ത് വിജയൻ] and Karin Bindu¹

ABSTRACT

The Kerala state in India offers a huge assemblage of various percussion eccentricities. Each percussion instrument sustains and preserves its own attributes: some drums accompany visual arts, others create a vibrant world of percussion music, and a few maintain both attributes. Almost all instruments are related to ceremonial pursuance and worship customs.

Mizhavu is a single-headed drum from Kerala that employs these kinds of ceremonial pursuance. The purpose of the instrument, which had also been used in temples in Tamil Nadu, is to accompany the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Kuttu* performances in the great temples (*mahakshetras*) for the pleasure of God's souls and the invocation of their powers. *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Kuttu* – Kerala's Sanskrit drama performing art forms – have been recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage due to 2000 years of tradition. As 'visual sacrifice' staging scenes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, they combine dance with theatre performance, Sanskrit verses (*slokas*), and percussive music in a ritualistic context. The main supporting percussion instrument (*mizhavu*) serves as *deva vādyam* – an instrument for the deities. Its classification as a one-headed drum covered with skin (*avanaddha vadya* of the *dardura* type) goes back to the *Natya Shastra* of Bharatamuni – some 2000 years ago. Definitions as kettledrum (*bhanda vadya*) trace it back to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. The Buddhist *Pali Tripitaka* refers to pot drums (*kumba toonak*). Tamil epics mention a *muzha* or *kuta muzha* drum. Publications in recent decades nearly mention that drum.

Production methods, forms, and material of the drum have changed over the ages. Attached to the artistic heritage of a certain Brahmin caste – the *Nampyar* – the drum has spent a long period in the environment of temple theatres. Since 1966, it has been taught to pupils of all castes at the Kerala Kalamandalam, Thrissur District. P.K.K. Nambiar worked as the first *mizhavu* teacher in the later added *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* department. He was followed by his pupil K. Eswaranunni, the first *mizhavu* guru from another caste, fighting for acceptance among members of *Chakyar* and *Nampyar* families. As a passionate master with numerous awards and performance experience all over the world, K. Eswaranunni has trained most of the contemporary *mizhavu* percussionists, who are still performing all over India as well as abroad. This paper gives an overview of the instrument and shows how the *mizhavu* is described by both gurus in their books written in Malayalam and by both authors including their personal relations to the drum.

KEYWORDS

Mizhavu, Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Percussion, Kerala, Nampyar, Kalamandalam

INTRODUCTION

The percussion instrument *mizhavu* (figure 1) is considered as the breathing sound element of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Kuttu* performance art forms in Kerala. Originally, it was played in temple theatres (*Kuthambalam*) exclusively by men of the *Nampyar* caste, who were accompanied by the cymbal (*kuzhitalam*) playing women of the *Nangiar* caste. Male and female performers of the Dramas came from the *Chakyar* caste. The temples had their own drums residing in the *Kuthambalam*. If no

¹ Kalamandalam Sajith Vijayan, MA [കലാമണ്ഡലം സജിത്ത് വിജയൻ] is an artist and contemporary *mizhavu* teacher of Kerala Kalamandalam, Deemed University of Performing Arts in South India. From 2001 to 2007, he studied the percussion instrument *mizhavu* at the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* Department of the Kalamandalam in Cheruthuruthy. For more information: sajithvijayankkm@yahoo.com; Karin Bindu, Magistra Dr works independently as percussionist and as cultural and social anthropologist. She also taught, as Senior Lecturer, the Introduction into the Ethnology of India at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna. For more information, one can consult her website: www.rhythmuse.at.

drums were available, they were borrowed from other temples.² There might have been other communities as well, who used the *mizhavu* for various purposes. In one of his recent interviews, P.K. Nambiar also mentioned the community Manapatta, who used to play *mizhavu* for the *Mane* art form with rings on the copper side instead of hands striking the calfskin covering.³

According to P.K. Nambiar (Bindu, 2013: 40), 18 families from the *Nampyar*, *Nangiar*, and *Chakyar* castes have existed in Kerala for more than 800 years. G. Venu (1989: 5) described an economical exchange business between the castes and the temples in former times: an annual performance over 40 days secured land for agricultural cultivation for the members of the castes. However, due to land reforms in the 1970s, the castes lost their land rights. Prior to the dramatic economic change for the artist communities, Rama Chakyar had begun to perform *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and the solo performance *Kuttu* outside the temple to reach audience from other castes and thereby secure the survival of the art forms. In our recent interview, K. Eswaranunni told us that Rama Chakyar had therefore made a small *mizhavu* – the first portable *mizhavu* in the history of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* – to play outside the *Kuthambalam*.⁴

Other South Indian art forms were threatened by extinction during the same timeframe. Consequently, the poet Vallathol Narayana Menon founded the Kerala Kalamandalam in Cheruthurutti in 1930 as a training centre for various performing art styles. Vasudevan Namputirippad worked as a tour manager and wrote curricula at the beginning of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* at the Kerala Kalamandalam. He mentioned in our interview in 2006 that Rama Chakyar's opening of the art form to the public was the starting point for opposition among the caste families. To date, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Kuttu* performers of other castes sometimes feel a kind of rivalry (Bindu, 2013: 41).

Knowledge of how to play the *mizhavu* instrument, made of copper, was transferred from teacher to pupil (*guru-shishya*) in an oral tradition. While Sanskrit Dramas have been recorded on palm leaves and in books for centuries and their performances have been researched by regional and international scientists, there are no publications about the *mizhavu* except later presented books by P.K. Nambiar and K. Eswaranunni. Sangeet Acharya (1956), Sambamoorthy (1960), Day (1983), Panchal (1984), Wade (1987), Nair in Sangeet Natak (1994), Pisharoty (1994), Deva (2000), Danielou (2004), Paniker (2005), Rajagopalan (2005), Paulose (2006), Moser (2008), and a few others are the only researchers of Indian musical instruments, who mentioned the *mizhavu* as a percussion instrument in secondary literary works written in English.

As mentioned in the abstract, different classifications of the instrument are known. Apart from scientific classifications, a mythological genesis of the instrument is transmitted orally from guru to pupil (*shishya*). In our recent interview, K. Eswaranunni repeated the story of how the *mizhavu* gained importance among the deities and became known as an instrument:

“In the epics, Nandigeshvara is mentioned as the first *mizhavu* drummer, who played for Lord Shiva's cosmic dance. One day another one of Lord Shiva's devotees, Banasura, played for Shiva. He enjoyed his play so much, that he blessed him with 1000 arms. So, then he drummed with 1000 arms for Lord Shiva's cosmic dance. Through the epics, we got to know about the drum, so their age could be related to the time epics were created.”⁵

Playing techniques and mnemonic syllables for the drum are taught in the oral tradition. “Whatever the guru teaches and says, the pupil should learn by heart and repeat. Whatever the guru said was

² Eswaranunni, K. 2021. Personal Interview among the authors, translated by K. Sajith Vijayan.

³ ANTARANG: Guru Shree P K Narayanan Nambiar is talking on 'Mizhavu – An Accompanying Instrument of Kūṭiyāṭṭam'. <https://www.facebook.com/watchparty/373588287168099/>, last accessed 12 April 2021.

⁴ Eswaranunni, K. 2021. Personal Interview among the authors, translated by K. Sajith Vijayan.

⁵ Eswaranunni, K. 2021. Personal Interview among the authors, translated by K. Sajith Vijayan.

his study material.”⁶ Eswaranunni (figure 2) mentioned that during his first teaching period at Kerala Kalamandalam, there were no books at all. This was one of the reasons why he decided to follow his guru’s inspiration and wrote a book about the *mizhavu* – a few years after the first book about the drum had been published by his guru P.K. Nambiar in 2004.



Figure 1: Sajith’s *mizhavu* in K. Eswaranunni’s house, 31 January 2021 (photo by the authors).⁷

In our interview, K. Eswaranunni emphasized the significance of the drum for a successful performance by saying that during a performance, all emotions come from the audience. Whatever the performer does on the stage, the drummer should follow, every moment of his expression with all his effort. Without the sound of the drum and all efforts of the drummer, every performance would be a waste. Only with the sound of the *mizhavu* will a performance be successful for the audience to enjoy it.⁸

According to P.K. Nambiar (Bindu, 2013: 197–198), there are not many instruments like the *mizhavu*, which are played after prolonged rites and rituals for empowerment. Each *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Kuttu* performance starts with an invocation called *Mizhavoccappettal*, in which the drum cleans the stage of demons and invites the deities to participate. After the rhythmical phrase, the drum gives its energy to the actors and actresses, who enter the stage behind a temporary curtain and bow in front of the drum before the curtain is lifted.

In *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, there are generally three kinds of percussion systems implemented by *mizhavu* percussionists: (1) areas that emphasize dance, (2) areas that give prominence to histrionics, and (3) areas that are more expressional. When there are no characters on stage, there is a kind of playing on the *mizhavu*. “Charikalakala vadyam/jathi kalakala vadyam/thappiyirangi thattu, nirgeetha, bandhananirgeetha parikramam” (Bindu, 2013: 114).

In the first system, the drummers react partly in unison to certain rhythmic movements (*kriyas* and *charis*) of the actors and actresses. In the second, however, adjustments are required from the more experienced *mizhavu* percussionists in response to various situations expressed using emotions by the characters on stage (*rasa abhinaya*). Face, eye, and hand movement details cannot be seen by the percussionists due to the position of the *mizhavus* at the back of the stage. According to their contextual knowledge, musical improvisations by the percussionists respond to all the physical movements of the actors (Nambiar, 1994: 107).

In addition to their duties as percussionists, *mizhavu* drummers act as directors, who handle stages and green rooms alike. The drummers announce the performance before it starts, fill and refill the

⁶ Eswaranunni, K. 2021. Personal Interview among the authors, translated by K. Sajith Vijayan.

⁷ All photos by the authors unless stated otherwise.

⁸ Eswaranunni, K. 2021. Personal Interview among the authors, translated by K. Sajith Vijayan.

oil lamp on stage, and help by decorating the stage as well as costuming the actors. Other duties involve the tuning, packing, and unpacking of the drum, placing it on the stage, helping their gurus and reciting the *Arangutali Sloka* before performances. They also must learn how to perform *Padhakam* – an oral delivery of epic stories outside the *Kuthambalam* (Bindu 2013: 249–250).



Figure 2: K. Eswaranunni played Sajith’s “travel *mizhavu*” in Cheruthuruthy for the joint contribution at the 23rd Symposium of the ICTM study group on musical instruments, 2021.

While these art forms testify to the heritage of nearly 20 centuries, the citizens of Kerala are less acquainted with *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, as K. Sajith Vijayan (figure 5 and figure 6) points out. *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Kuttu* even demand training to become an audient. The joyful pleasure of a performance can only be attained if one knows the basics of primitive Sanskrit, Malayalam, *Mudra* (hand gestures) action, and *Rasa* acting (*rasabhinaya*).⁹ The nomination by UNESCO as “Intangible Heritage” in 2001 impacted on practitioners and researchers, who are attached to the eight *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* centres all over Kerala. Richmond (2011: 29) remarked that “the level of sophistication of the *mizhavu* drumming, the large number of new young artists, and the vigour and subtlety of their playing has provided an opportunity for the actors to extend and expand the range of their *bhava* and *rasa* ... *mizhavu* drumming has become so popular that *mizhavu* thayambaka has come into being and appears to be recognized as independent form of artistic expression.”

In our recent article entitled ‘Contemporary Types of Ritualistic South Indian *mizhavu* Percussion Ensembles in Kerala,’ we described ritualistic *mizhavu* ensembles (Vijayan and Bindu 2019: 28–41). For the first time, we considered those that follow different rhythmic patterns than for *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Kuttu* performances, such as *mizhavu Thyambaka* and *mizhavu Panjari Melam*.¹⁰ Their artistic creation goes back to guru K. Eswaranunni and his guru P.K. Nambiar. In an interview, K. Eswaranunni mentioned that these popular art forms contain sufficient potential for research in the future.

The following sections illustrate how four *mizhavu* drummers – imagined as links in a chain of *guru-shishya* relations – describe the instrument in different ways. As already mentioned, P.K. Nambiar and K. Eswaranunni – his pupil – wrote their books about the *mizhavu* in Malayalam. Being the first for English language scholarship, K. Sajith Vijayan gives an overview of their books’ contents before describing the instrument from his own viewpoint,¹¹ followed by aspects of my research structure as the ‘last link’ in our chain. In different ways, all of us are ‘writing in devotion’ for the *deva vadyam*.

⁹ Sajith Vijayan 2021. Personal Interview among the authors.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGzMm-Lliek>, last accessed 18 February 2021.

¹¹ Vijayan, Sajith 2021. Personal Interview among the authors.

MIZHAVU: NAMPYARUDE KRAMADIPIKA BY P.K. NARANAYAN NAMBIAR

Kochambully Mattathil Narayanan Nambiar (figure 3) is the supreme *Gurunadhan* of the percussion instrument *mizhavu*. He is known by the nickname “Nambiarashan” among *mizhavu* artists in Kerala. His Malayalam language book – “*mizhavu – Nampyarude Kramadipika*” (Nambiar: 2005) – can be regarded as an encyclopaedia, starting from the exposition of the practice of *mizhavu* to various related subjects. This book contains 10 important chapters after the preface titled “Nandhi.” After these chapters, another seven chapters serve as addendums. In addition to a corrigendum and pictures of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performances, his book also includes the mythology related to *mizhavu*. Mythological resources form the prime motif in the first chapter “Poorvarangam.”

The next part cross-references *mizhavu* from other books. Hints and references to the ancient Tamil *Sangam* literature “Chilappathikaram” are denoted. The other “4ms” included in the first chapter comprises production methods of the *mizhavu*, shapes, and its different pursuance rituals and ritualistic duties on the stage.

“ക്ഷേത്രം അശുദ്ധമായാൽ പുണ്യാഹം ചെയ്തു ശുദ്ധമാക്കുന്നതിനോടൊപ്പം കൂത്തമ്പലവും പുണ്യാഹം ചെയ്തു ശുദ്ധമാക്കണം. കൂത്തിനല്ലാതെ മറ്റൊന്നിനും ഈ വാദ്യം ഉപയോഗിച്ചുകൂടാ.” (മിഴാവ്, നാരായണൻ നമ്പ്യാർ പി. കെ 2005 പേജ് 9).

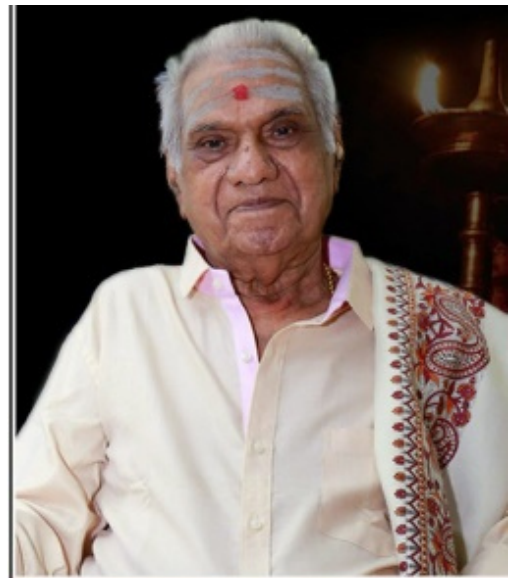
[If any impurity happens inside the temple, the temple should be made pristine with a divine procedure called ‘punyaham.’ At the time of this divine pristine, the *mizhavu* and Kuthambalam should also be aseptic. Apart from that, the instrument called *mizhavu* must be used only for Koothu, Koodiyatam, and Nangyarkoothu, as it has been decided by the ancestors.] (Nambiar, 2005: 9).

Mizhavu teaching methods are described next. There is explained oral notation and its usages for the art of playing. The following is based on the musical rhythms (*talas*). Various aspects of the characters and their emotions are elaborated in the same chapter. Thereafter, Nambiar explains the conjunction of dance and acting in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. Stage performance used for ritualistic enactments of the national epics is explained too. Another part explains the percussion challenges in the performance of special characters. Dance movements and their differences according to the characters are explained in the chapter ‘Kootiyattathile chareebhedhangal.’ The next chapter explains the prelude hymns sung by the *mizhavu* player before *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performances to clear the stage.

Figure 3: P.K. Nambiar October 2020, granted by Hareesh Nambiar on April 2021.

In the following part, the *Manipravala* Prose – “Nambiar Tamizh” – is added to explain the oral presentation of “Anguliangam Koothu” by the *Nampyar* or the *mizhavu* player. This part contains the fifth act of “Ascharyochoodamani,” written by Shaktibadra in the 13th century AD. It’s significance results from the fact, that it was the first play ever to become a part of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*.

As the main character, Hanuman performs all parts in a performance lasting 12 days. The next chapter explains the costume and ornament-making methods required for various characters, which should be known by *mizhavu* players to differentiate them. The following chapter “Anubhandham” includes details about hand gestures (*mudras*), which are used to narrate the stories, and acting parts (*attangal*), special portrayals of characters such as the trickster



Vidhooshakan. It also mentions *Natya Shastra* affirmations related to *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, special presentations related to *Kuttu*, as well as data about the lifestyles of Kerala's *mizhavu* percussionists, who lived in the house of P.K. Nambiar. Sri Narayanan Nambiar's book analyses all aspects related to the art of playing the *mizhavu*.¹²

NAMBIAR'S PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS DRUM

Sri P.K. Narayanan Nambiar is an indigenous player of the instrument *mizhavu*, as Sajith Vijayan told me during our interview in January 2021. Therefore, he can testify to the persistence of Nambiar's book concerning his care not to break the traditional ceremonial pursuances and disciplines of this art form. P.K. Nambiar perceives it as more than a percussion instrument; it is a deity. Consequently, the concentration and care for practicing and handling applications are explained in detail in the chapter 'Anubhandham.'

P.K. Nambiar emphasizes the artist's responsibilities in the last portion under the heading "Some Special Things the Nambiar Must Know about Koothu and Kootiyattam." Traditional habits and his analytical reflections are included in this section. *Mizhavu* is considered as a conception of God with various attributes rather than a "dead thing creating rhythm." This perspective runs like a thread through Narayanan Nambiar's words. The percussionist on stage is not merely a drummer but also a director, who knows and controls all activities and responsibilities throughout the play as well as in the green room and around the stage. Nambiar also gives clear instructions for a rhythmic *mizhavu talas* reciter – the required graceful versatility and the demanded insistence on practicing. To be born into Nambiar's ancestry is not sufficient to play *mizhavus* well; Nambiar emphasizes in his book, that intense practice, continuous studies, the capacity to be active in combination with a sense of responsibility are the qualities that shape *mizhavu* players: "*Mizhavu* has been handled by the Nambiaris with ritual devotion. It is their *kulathozhil* (community-profession). If they don't do it properly, their family and successors will be affected. They should keep in mind the rituals observed rigorously by the predecessors. The non-Nambiaris should play with an extreme devotion to the artistic content of Koodiyattam" (Bindu, 2013: 117).

MIZHAVOLI BY KALAMANDALAM ESWARANUNNI

"Mizhavoli," written by Kalamandalam Eswaranunni (2010), is the second Malayalam book about *mizhavu*. The author's intention was to codify all subjects that must be studied by *mizhavu* students. Rhythmic applications, Sanskrit studies, and articles form the contents. To date, two editions have been published. This review introduces the second edition: a preface and foreword written by K.G. Paulose in the first edition are included in the first part of the second edition. Thereafter, a preface written by N.P Unni is adjoined. In the following chapter, K. Eswaranunni introduces the instrument *mizhavu* as well as its appropriate residency within a temple compound:

“ക്ഷേത്രത്തിലെ പഞ്ചപ്രസാദങ്ങളിൽ ഒന്നായ നാട്യപ്രസാദത്തിലെ രംഗ പീഠത്തിൽ കൂതപസ്ഥാനത്തു □ രുനു നിത്യബ്രഹ്മചര്യം അനുഷ്ഠിച്ച് ഓങ്കാരത്തെകൊണ്ട് നാദബ്രഹ്മത്തെ ആരാധിച്ചുകൊണ്ടിരിക്കുകയാണെന്നാണ് ഈ ദേവവാദ്യത്തിന്റെ സങ്കല്പം.” (ഈശ്വരനുണ്ണി, മിഴാവൊലി 2019 പേജ്-24).

[If a temple should become a “mahakshethra” (big temple) among other temples, it must fulfil certain requirements and arrangements. The temple should contain five types of buildings called “Panchaprasadhangal.” One part inside the area is called “Nrithanatkshala” (dance-drama stage) alias “Koothambalam.” This building is also known as “Natyaprasadham.” Behind the screen of this building, there is a particular place to keep the instrument *mizhavu*, which is regarded as an

¹² Vijayan, Sajith 2021. Personal Interview among the authors.

unmarried celibate, who sits and worships the “Nadhabrahma” by enchanting “om.”] (Eswaranunni 2019: 24).

Preliminary lessons required for the study of percussion are given in the next chapter. The mnemonic syllables (*vaittari*) memorized by the instrument players are included in the following five chapters. The next six chapters provide general knowledge of the Sanskrit language needed by the percussionist. After these instructions, abstracts, theses, and interpretations of the epic *Ramayana* are included, which are required for the study of solo performance (*Kuttu*) and storytelling (*Padhakam*). The last chapters include stories of the epic *Mahabharata* in Sanskrit Verses (*Savyakyanam Panchalisabhadham Prabhandam*) and a story about *Shiva* from the *Shivapurana* (*Tripura Dhanam*).¹³



Figure 4: K. Eswaranunni as *Padhakam* performer. Photo granted by Eswaranunni, March 2021.

SIGNIFICANCE OF MIZHAVU IN ESWARANUNNI’S WRITING

Sri Eswaranunni (figure 4) clarifies the germane perspective of his writing in the foreword: he offers a study book for all Kerala Kalamandalam *mizhavu* students ranging from the eighth standard to master’s degree students. In preparing this book, the author includes all subjects for memorization by *mizhavu* students as well as all requirements for language practice. At the outset, he includes general information about the performance art forms *Chakyar Kuttu*, *Padhakam*, Sanskrit verses, the play of the *mizhavu* drum, among others. The author gives simple explanations for the students who enjoy primary education in *mizhavu* and for all people interested in learning the basics about *mizhavu*.

In comparison with Narayanan Nambiar, the only living supreme traditional veteran among *mizhavu* practitioners, Sri Eswaranunni was the first outcaste *mizhavu* maestro. He served as guru to more than 90% of all contemporary *mizhavu* practitioners. While Narayan Nambiar’s book explains more about *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, *mizhavu*, *Kuttu*, its presentation, interrelations, and attributes for practitioners, Eswaranunni’s book converges on educational matters concerning the performance of *mizhavu* and the information about the language.

Asked about his personal way of drumming, he said that whatever problems arise, forget about them while drumming. The mind should observe the stage, the drummer should follow, whatever comes. He must concentrate his mind on that”. Eswaranunni never learnt *Thyambaka*, but when he is drumming on the stage, something automatic, spontaneous is coming, because he is concentrating on it. Something from his mind, from his Lord, is coming, he can think, about which way is better to drum, this way or that way. Concentration is the main thing for drumming, and his way is the same.¹⁴

Despite retiring, K. Eswaranunni is still actively involved in teaching, performing, and writing books. In recent years, he has published more than 11 books about the stories (*Prabhantas*) he performs as a *Kuttu* and *Padhakam* artist. The local newspaper reported about his “mission to

¹³ Vijayan Sajith 2021. Personal Interview among the authors.

¹⁴ Eswaranunni, K. 2021. Personal Interview among the authors, translated by Sajith Vijayan.

regain the lost popularity of the works of Malpathoor Narayana,” which are made public by the art forms.¹⁵

During our interview in 2021, K. Eswaranunni stated that he would stay at home and spend most of his time writing books because of the pandemic.



Figure 5: K. Eswaranunni being interviewed, 31 January 2021.

AUTHOR K. SAJITH VIJAYAN AND THE MIZHAVU

I am Sajith Vijayan, officially known as Kalamandalam Sajith. I was born in Kerala and deal with a fascinating Kerala art form. I started my *mizhavu* studies at the Kerala Kalamandalam in 1999. Prior to my training and life as a contemporary *mizhavu* teacher at Kalamandalam, art forms like *Kuttu*, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, and *mizhavu* were familiar to me due to my life circumstances: my home place maintains many unique temple traditions and most hold festivals on specific days. Located near Thrissur – originally named Thrissivaperoor – the ‘cultural capital of Kerala,’ it is known for traditional arts and performing arts.

Anyone from this place knows about percussion instruments as well as performing art forms like *Kathakali*, *Kuttu*, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, and a special dance performance including songs, called ‘Thullal.’ During my childhood, I saw greenish make-up and colourful costumes. I loved *Kuttu* and *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and I tried hard to become the actor and “background scorer” of the art forms. In the case of *mizhavu*, I wanted to express my endless love towards the study of the instrument. I genuinely enjoyed my journey towards the heart of *mizhavu*. Its history, usage, customs, and traditions were my favourite research topic as a child. I adored the concept of altruistic performing arts, the presumption of the percussion instrument as *Deva* (God), and the resulting mundanity of God. I am, however, a person who believes that the backbone of the art is its customs. Following the scriptures should therefore be protected. The structure, attitude, and quality have been changing over recent decades. This kind of affinity for tradition always made me stand up against the malpractices about to happen in the usage, presentation, and explanation of the instrument *mizhavu* by fast-growing generational cohorts.

In contrast, I do not want this instrument to remain in isolation in the darkest caves covered with mould and rust. The performing stage should follow its own path of rightness; without doubt, the emergence of the art and the instrument’s core should be shared with interested audiences. Presentations should be created and protected, and the consumption of *mizhavu* in *Kuttu* and *Kuttiyattam* should not be limited to high-class audiences. Free orchestration should not only

¹⁵ <https://english.mathrubhumi.com/books/books-news/-mizhavu-maestro-easwaranunni-pens-books-for-future-generation-1.5089491>, last accessed 19 February 2021.

happen as an experiment but also as a permanent feature. Over the last decade, *mizhavu* has shown its significance in various ways. Keeping traditions in mind, we must treat the *mizhavu* as embodied and involved instrument, not just as a stereotype-producing sound. Maintaining its pride will help this instrument to assume its deserved throne, supported by in-depth studies and mindful practices. According to these principles, I supervised the doctorate theses and publications written by Karin Bindu. An overview of her published research is described in the following chapter.



Figure 5 (left): K. Sajith Vijayan at Bammanur Bhagavathi Temple, April 2021. Figure 6 (right): Kūṭiyāṭṭam Performance “Subadradananjayam” with Kalamandalam artists at Bammanur Bhagavathi Temple, granted by Sajith Vijayan.

PERCUSSION ART FORMS: ASPECTS OF PRODUCTION AND COMMUNICATION OF SOUTH INDIAN TALAS IN THE KŪṬIYĀṬṬAM BY KARIN BINDU

This book was written as a PhD thesis at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, based on various field studies at the Kerala Kalamandalam; it was finally published in 2013. As the “last link” in the chain of the just presented *mizhavu* masters, I still feel far away from mastering the drum itself. I (figure 7) saw the drum in 2004 when I visited Kerala Kalamandalam for the first time. Before that, I had never seen an Indian percussion instrument played with full hands, which was comparable to African drums, which I had already practised for some years. The strange sound of the *mizhavu*’s copper body touched me inside and awoke my curiosity. When I learnt of its spiritual roots, ancient history, and ritualistic use, I decided to enrol at Kerala Kalamandalam as a pupil of K. Eswaranunni in 2005. My research focused primarily on South Indian musical rhythm systems, which I had already partly experienced by studying *Tablas* and *Mrdangam* – percussion instruments for classical North and South Indian music. Generally, I feel deeply connected to the bond between drums, healing, and spirituality in various cultures, but I “fell” for Indian drums in a special way in 1991. Since that time, their rhythms have provided certain internal energy and happiness, which I always wish to be part of my life.

When I discovered the underrepresentation of articles about *mizhavu* drummers in comparison to numerous studies and publications about the acting in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Kuttu*, I decided to include various aspects of the drummers’ ways of life and education in my book. Female *mizhavu* drummers are generally rare; nevertheless, I was lucky to be among K. Eswaranunni’s short-term pupils in 2005/2006. He has never rejected me because of my gender and even has accepted the presence of my children during tutorials and discussions. I was initiated into play the *mizhavu* in a ritualistic way but never reached the level of first stage performance (*arrangetam*). This would require a lot more practice in the community, which does not exist in Austria.

Since my PhD graduation, I have sometimes given lecture demonstrations about the *mizhavu*, have observed, produced publications, and followed the developments of my drumming brothers and teachers in the hope of intensifying my practical playing one day. Until then my travel *mizhavu* is resting in her place in front of my house shrine waiting for reactivation. I hope once more to be accepted by K. Eswaranunni as a pupil and want to thank him with all my heart, as well as his guru P.K. Nambiar, for all discussions and interviews.

K. Sajith Vijayan has helped me to understand various aspects of *mizhavu* drumming and drummers. He translated or answered my questions and supervised the creation of my book. I invited him twice to Austria to give lecture demonstrations at the University of Vienna and other institutions. Our collaboration has always been joyful, familiar, blessed, and informative. Every kind of occupation with South Indian drumming includes inner development in the mystic history and richness of Indian rhythms. I still intend to journey deeper into the knowledge of Indian drums, their rhythmic evolution, and the history of *mizhavu*.



Figure 7: Karin Bindu, lecture demonstration at Natya Mandir, Vienna, May 2019 (photo courtesy: Eva Bräuer).

In my book, written in German, I dedicated a comprehensive chapter to the *mizhavu* drum. Inspired by Mantle Hood (1982: 123–124), I titled it “Organology.” The title also honours the anthropomorphic qualities of the drum. The first chapter (Bindu, 2013: 155–160) relates to various classifications of the drum depending on its form, position, material, and references in different written resources such as the Tamil Epos *Shilappatikaram*, the *Natya Shastra*, and others. The following chapters (Bindu 2013: 160–170) describe the body of the *mizhavu*, the Malayalam nomenclature, and how its terms are identical to those for the human body. Moreover, they contain knowledge about the construction methods of the *mizhavu*. Kerala tourism provides some insights¹⁶ into the physical construction, and P.K. Nambiar explained the rituals for the *mizhavu*, regarded as a pupil of Brahma (*brahmacari*). The sacred drum receives all Hindu rituals like humans except the marriage ritual.

The following chapters (Bindu, 2013: 170–188) give detailed information about the mnemonic syllables (*vayttari*), playing techniques, and sound qualities of the drum. Syllables connect the human breath with the movement of the drumming hands and contain the playing technique as well as the structure of the rhythm. *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* actors practice their movements with the same syllables, hence, why a performance with drummers would be possible without common rehearsals (although the quality of the performance would be reduced).

Positions of the drums and drummers as well as energy flow are described in the following chapters (Bindu, 2013: 193–197). The relation of the *mizhavu* to the deities (*devas*) forms the content of the last chapter dealing exclusively with the instrument (Bindu, 2013: 200–203).

CONCLUSION

Mizhavu, a South Indian drum originally made of clay, has existed for more than 2000 years in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The functions, forms, and materials of the instrument changed over the

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCJfUW9M7DU>, last accessed 20 March 2020.

course of time. For 700–800 years, it has provided the principal sound atmosphere in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Kuttu* performances attached to temple theatres and to certain castes. The size and form of the instrument vary according to the size and form of the temple theatres, to guarantee the best sound quality. As an instrument for the deities (*deva vadyam*), the *mizhavu* pleases deities and humans alike, who participate in those performance art forms. *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Kuttu* performances – reenactments of stories from the national epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* – are regarded as visual sacrifices; therefore, all musicians, performers, and materials must be purified.

With instruments such as *edakka* (an hourglass shaped drum), *kurum kuzhal* (horn), *shanku* (conch), and *kuzhitalam* (cymbals), the *mizhavu* forms the five instruments (*panchavadyam*) of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. During recent decades, these art forms transcended the exclusivity of their performance by members of the *Chakyar*, *Nampyar*, and *Nambiar* castes. Today, the number of practitioners of all castes has increased and thereby provides sustainability. As a percussion instrument, the *mizhavu* is becoming more and more involved in orchestral temple performances (*thyambaka* and *melam*) in combination with percussion instruments such as the *thimila* drum, *centa* drum, gong, *kuzhal* (wind instrument), and *talam* (big cymbals). Contemporary artists are attached to more than eight *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* centres all over Kerala, some of which tour within and beyond India.

The retired *mizhavu* maestros P.K. Nambiar and K. Eswaranunni have written Malayalam books about the all-embracing art of performing as *mizhavu* drummers and *Chakyar Kuttu* and *Pathakam* artists to guarantee the survival and sustainability of the art and instrument. New articles are rare, while numerous posts on social media and YouTube channels by contemporary *mizhavu* drummers and *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* actors spread its unique sound and performance beauty around the world. Interests in the historical, political, spiritual, poetical, dramatic, emotional, artistic, and aesthetic principles of the described art forms are pursued by Indian and international scientists, art lovers, and more than 100 practitioners in Kerala and abroad. Complex rhythmical arrangements provide limitless potential for development and exploration. K. Eswaranunni emphasizes the importance of the *mizhavu* drum. It should be heard and played everywhere in a manner that respects and honours its heritage and ritual requirements. In times of crises, such as the current pandemic, artists – deprived of performance possibilities – suffer the most. The state and the people should support artists and offer more opportunities for the survival of the art.

REFERENCES

- Bindu, Karin. 2013. *Percussion Art Forms. Aspekte der Produktion und Kommunikation südindischer Tālas im Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. Wien: LIT Verlag.
- Bindu, Karin. 2016. Talas in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam. In *Nartanam. A Quarterly Journal of Indian Dance. Vol. XVI No. 3*, July–September 2016. Hyderabad (IN): Sahrdaya Arts Trust: 195–209.
- Bindu, Karin. 2016. *Mizhavu – göttliches Perkussionsinstrument im südindischen Sanskrit-Drama Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. *Anthropos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Völker- und Sprachkunde*, 111 (2). 395–415. DOI: 10.5771/0257-9774-2016-2-395.
- Day, C.R. 1983. *The Music and Musical Instruments of Southern India and the Deccan*. 3rd Reprint. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- Deva, B. Chaitanya. 2000. *Musical Instruments of India. Their History and Development*. New Delhi: Munishiram Manoharlal Publishers.
- Daniélou, Alain. 2004. *Einführung in die indische Musik*. 5. Auflage. Wilhelmshaven: Florian Noetzel Verlag.
- Eswaranunni, K. 2010. *Milāvoli*. Cheruthuruthy: Sreevidya Publications. Eswaranunni, K.
- Eswaranunni, K. 2019. *Milāvoli*. 2nd Edition. Guruvayur: Theerabhoomi Publications.
- Eswaranunni, K. 2021. Zoom Interview among the authors, translated by K. Sajith Vijayan.

- Gupta, S. 2003. The Nāṭya Śāstra of Bharatamuni. *Raga Nrtya Series* No.2. Reprinted: Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, Chawla Offest Press.
- Hood, Mantle. 1982. *The Ethnomusicologist*. Ohio: The Kent State University.
- Moser, Heike. 2008. *Naññyār –Kūttu – ein Teilaspekt des Sanskrittheaterkomplexes Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Historische Entwicklung und performative Textumsetzung*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Nair, Appukuttan. 1994. The Art of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. I *Sangeet Natak, Special Issue: Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, Numbers 111–114. New Delhi: Usha Malik, Sangeet Natak, 12–32.
- Nambiar, P.K. Naranayan. 1994. Rhythm and Music. *Sangeet Natak, Special Issue: Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, Numbers 111–114. New Delhi: Usha Malik, Sangeet Natak, 101–112.
- Nambiar, P.K. Naranayan. 2005. *Milāvu Nampyārūde Kramadipika*. Killimangalam: Mani Madhava Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam.
- Panchal, Goverdan. 1984. *Kūttampalam and Kūṭiyāṭṭam. A Study of The Traditional Theatre for the Sanskrit Drama of Kerala*. Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi.
- Paniker, Nirmala. 2005. *The Heritage. Preserving the Age-Old Sanskrit Theater*. Edited by Nangiar Koothu and G. S. Paul. Thrissur: Lumiere Printing Works, 35–41.
- Paulose, K.G. 2006. *Kūṭiyāṭṭam Theatre. The earliest Living Tradition*. Kottayam, DC Books.
- Pisharoty, K.P. Narayana. 1994. Koothu and Kootiattam. In: Sarabhai, Mallika (Ed.), *Performing Arts of Kerala*. Ahmedabad: Grantha Publication in Association with Mapin Publishing, 100–127.
- Rajagopalan, L.S. 2005. The *mizhavu*. *The Heritage. Preserving the Age-Old Sanskrit Theater*. Edited by G. S. Paul. Thrissur: Lumiere Printing Works, 29–34.
- Richmond, Farley. 2011. Changes in Kūṭiyāṭṭam : Preliminary Observations. In *Indian Folklife*, Serial No.38. Muthukumaraswamy, M.D.; Narayanan, Bhargavi; Moser, Heike; Sivasakthivel, P. (Eds.). Chennai: NFSC: 28–31.
- Sambamoorthy, P. 1960. *History of Indian Music*. Madras -1: The Indian Music Publishing House.
- Sangeet Acharya, R.A.V. 1956. *Musical Instruments of India. History and Development*. New Delhi: Pankaj Publications.
- Venu, Gopal. 1989. Production of a Play in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. *Documentation of Kūṭiyāṭṭam Series No. 1*. Trichur: Lumiere Printing Works.
- Vijayan, Sajith and Karin Bindu. 2019. Contemporary Types of Ritualistic South Indian *Mizhavu* Percussion Ensembles in Kerala. *Traditional Music and Dance in Contemporary Culture(s)*. Edited by Jana Ambrózová, and Bernard Garaj. Nitra: Constantine the Philosopher University, 28–41.
- Vijayan, Sajith. 2021. Interview among the authors. Online.
- Wade, Bonnie C. 1987. *Music in India: The Classical Traditions*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.