

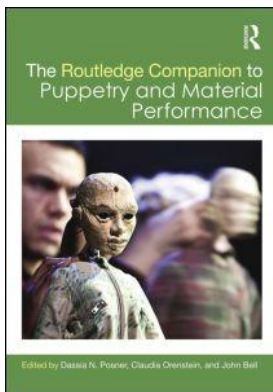
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Forging New Paths for Kerala's *Tolpavakoothu* Leather Shadow Puppetry Tradition

Claudia Orenstein

In his 1999 essay “If Gandhi Could Fly ... Dilemmas and Directions in Shadow Puppetry in India,” Salil Singh analyzed attempts of performers at the National Shadow Puppetry Festival in Dharmasthala, Karnataka, to revitalize their endangered art forms. While many troupes at the festival offered traditional shows based on India's Hindu epics, government agencies commissioned companies from five states to take episodes from the life of Gandhi as a new subject, hoping to reach out to contemporary audiences. For Singh the experiment proved unsuccessful:

Puppeteers in whose hands shadows of mythical heroes had danced and cavorted, accompanied by passionate songs and cascading music, suddenly found themselves struggling awkwardly with bland images of a national hero, uninspired and uninspiring.

(Singh 1999: 154)

Singh felt the festival revealed a few distinct paths for shadow puppetry, “either to abandon precedent expediently, without recourse to an equally powerful aesthetic which could propel the art into the future; or to repeat tradition without adapting it to today's cultural realities.” Puppeteers could also follow the middle path taken by a troupe from the Bellary region of Karnataka and “successfully create an updated folklore outside of the ancient epics, yet not as contemporary as the Gandhi episodes” (Singh 1999: 166).

Among the troupes that in 1999 stuck to their traditional form was a *tolpavakoothu*, or leather shadow company, from the Palakkad district of Kerala, under the direction of master puppeteer Krishnankutty Pulavar.¹ Today, with his son Ramachandra at the helm, the company continues to struggle with the complex issues of preservation that faced them then but which have become more pressing in the last decade during India's rapid economic growth and accelerated transformation of traditional lifestyles. As India dedicates itself to becoming a major economic power, important questions persist: what role does traditional performance play in Indian

life, more than embodying and preserving a reminder of the past? How can traditions continue to be living arts, relevant to the lives of spectators and practitioners alike as India moves towards further urbanization, globalization, and mastery of new technologies? For puppetry to entice new generations of performers, increasingly lured away to more attractive careers in computers and engineering, it must not only promise to sustain them economically but offer engagement in a purposeful, culturally relevant, and appreciated activity.

Ramachandra's company exemplifies the challenges facing traditional Indian puppeteers. While the Indian government and other organizations like the Sangeet Natak Akademi (India's National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama) have programs to help traditional artists, in the end it falls to individuals – the practitioners and caretakers of these forms who often must dedicate their entire lives to the work – to make choices about their commitments and whether to preserve, transform, pass on, or abandon their heritage.

While in 1999 Singh outlined various distinct, possible options for shadow puppetry, with puppeteers choosing between an adherence to new or old models, today the Pulavars take an eclectic approach to sustaining their art, following all the different paths Singh suggested and more. They attempt, in a more hybrid style, to keep their ritual form of puppetry intact, continuing those annual performances associated with temples, while exploiting their skills in carving, performing, and storytelling in various new ways outside the temple grounds. In its new incarnations *tolpavakoothu* is as much a business proposition as an artistic one. Trying out new stories for performance is only one of many ways the company is confronting today's cultural realities.

Ramachandra, in response to present circumstances, embodies a new and perhaps increasingly prevalent model of the artist-entrepreneur. He combines artistic skills and practices passed down over generations with a modern aptitude for seizing new opportunities to bring visibility to his art and promote it to a wider audience, hoping to make it economically viable. He shares his knowledge and skills liberally so *tolpavakoothu* can be widely recognized. In 2008, when he resigned from his post office job, he became the first *tolpavakoothu* performer to devote himself full time to puppetry, no longer solely as a ritual form but also as a wider secular occupation, reaching beyond local interests to connect with a national and international artistic world. He has committed to refashioning an art and way of life handed down over 12 generations into one that can engage fruitfully with the contemporary world, hoping his children will carry on the family tradition.

The tradition

Kerala's shadow puppetry derives its depth and beauty from formal practices developed over the tradition's long history, reportedly going back 1200 years (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013).² The puppets enact events from the Hindu Ramayana epic, as recounted in the Tamil language version composed by the poet Kambar (also known as Kampan), the *Kamba Ramayana*³ (Venu 2006: 8). Today's performers continue to use a mix of Tamil, Sanskrit, and Malayalam, the local language of Kerala. The main text, verses from the *Kamba Ramayana*, are in Tamil, but the puppeteers also engage in deep narration beyond the written text, explaining the

background and other aspects of well-known events.⁴ They participate in question-and-answer repartee in which the head puppeteer, known as the *pulavar* (a term which means “scholar”), answers questions, posed by the other puppeteers, that emerge from the telling and which can lead him into philosophical territory, as well as tangential stories. His astuteness at providing the answers for these traditional questions earns him his honored title. Each puppet company explores its own interests via its additions and explanations. Ramachandra’s group, for example, enjoys cosmological questions. Malayalam creeps in during these explanatory passages to help communicate the text to the local audience. Younger performers, who don’t know Tamil, now use more and more Malayalam in these sections (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013).

The primary intended spectator for this sacred show is the goddess Bhagavati, also known as Bhadrakali. According to myth, the goddess was busy fighting the demon Darika when one of the major events of the Ramayana took place: Rama’s killing of Ravana, the demon King of Lanka.⁵ Since Bhadrakali was unable to witness Ravana’s defeat, the shadow performance re-enacts it for her. Today, the once-abundant human spectators for the show are largely absent. Television, film, other entertainments, and the demands of changing work schedules have usurped the previously captivated audiences in rural areas. Ramachandra remembers full crowds of 500 or more for the shows of his childhood (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013). Performers continue to adhere to their sacred performance task, often playing only for the goddess. Because of the benefits performance brings as a ritual offering, an ample number of organizations and individuals remain interested in sponsoring temple shows during the four-month performance season, but the grounds in front of the puppet theatres remain largely empty.

Performances take place in long, thin, permanent structures called *koothoo-madam*, or drama- (or play)-houses, dedicated exclusively to shadow puppetry and built on temple grounds. Around 70 of these unusual buildings exist throughout Kerala (Venu 2006: 15). The shadow screen covers the long open front end of the building, usually set directly across from the goddess’s temple, so Bhadrakali can enjoy the play of shadows from her sacred abode. Elaborate rituals before the show, including a procession accompanied by music bringing fire from the puppet house to the temple, further connect the puppets with the presence of the goddess.

Up to 150 puppets may be used over the course of performances that can last for 7, 14, 21, 41, or 71 days. These figures were once carved from deer hide, but as this practice is now illegal, today’s puppeteers use buffalo skins (*Borrowed Fire* 2000). The hides are cleaned and puppets carefully cut out based on pre-existing patterns, then painted. Puppeteers traditionally fashion the paints from local plants for a predominantly earthy palette of browns, reds, and yellows, enhanced by green, black, and blue. Various shaped chisels punched into the leather create elaborate ornamental designs on the figures. These project rich patterns of light on the screen during performance. Important characters like Rama appear in three forms: a seated version that has one independently moving jointed arm (this form includes the character’s throne and a frame surrounding the image; such puppets are more like pictures with moving parts than independent figures, comparable to some Thai and Cambodian shadow figures); a standing/walking figure with one movable, jointed arm; and a fighting version with two movable, jointed arms.



Figure 19.1 A forest scene from the traditional *tolpavakoothu* performance, Kerala, India (July 21, 2013). Photo courtesy of the author

The tradition is also remarkable for the many animal puppets that fill the scenes of Rama's famous exile in the forest: birds with flapping wings, slithering snakes, deer that gambol and spin, and voracious tigers and lions. The stylization of the figures echoes the aesthetic of Kerala's mural paintings, which apparently go back to ancient times, as well as regional temple carvings and the images from local snake rituals that are shaped on the ground from colorful spice powders (Venu 2006: 30).

A dying art?

These long cultural roots and practices belie the form's seemingly precarious existence over at least the last 100 years. The form was already thought lost by Western scholars before 1935 when an American journalist and a German scholar reported seeing shows (Blackburn 1996: 2). Even then, *tolpavakoothu* remained an obscure form from a global perspective, "known to the outside world only by a handful of essays until 1986, when Dr. F. Seltman published his excellent monograph" (Blackburn 1996: 2). When scholar Stuart Blackburn saw his first full-length *tolpavakoothu* in January 1984, the audience of living spectators had already abandoned the form. Puppeteers had also dwindled in number and commitment:

Forty puppeteers were reported to be active in 1982, of whom only twenty-five still performed in 1989, and many of them were too feeble to chant through the night. Over the five-year span of my research, three puppeteers died and one retired from illness, but not a single new man entered the drama-house.

(Blackburn 1996: 238)

The tradition's survival remains in question in Anurag Wadehra, Salil Singh, and Marc Stone's documentary *Borrowed Fire* (2000), which focuses on Krishnankutty's company, with Krishnankutty introduced as "the last surviving master of a thousand-year-old form of shadow puppetry." The film honors his commitment to keeping the tradition alive, with all its adherent protocols, and to passing it on to his sons through rigorous daily instruction and recitation, but also leaves viewers concerned for its future. On camera, Krishnankutty's sons acknowledge the debt they owe their father, while asserting that they don't feel the forced model of learning they endured throughout their childhood – to memorize the 1,200 to 2,000 verses needed to chant the play's text – can continue into the next generation.⁶

When I asked Ramachandra if there was ever a time he thought he might abandon puppetry, he confirmed that as a young man he got himself a driver's license as part of a plan to become a taxi driver. Long nights of sitting in chilly puppet houses several hours' drive from home with little recompense – sometimes only a few rupees per night – left him hungry and with only one shirt to his name. These circumstances made him question the significance of the form and the dedication it required. His father would allow him to choose his path but still insisted family members know the Ramayana in depth for its religious benefits and because of the family's reputation as *pulavars* (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013).

In the modern era, loss of royal patronage contributed to worsening conditions for puppeteers throughout India. The final blow came in 1971 when the Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the Indian constitution ended royal status and the financial privilege of the privy purses distributed to royal houses. The Pulavar's company was the *kavalapura*, or palace or king's group, and historically had enjoyed royal patronage expressed through lavish multicourse meals that fed the troupe during their performing months. Their work was honored in concrete terms that showed appreciation and kept performers fed and happy. When this patronage dissolved, other sponsorship did not match the former models. Puppeteers have had to make a conceptual shift from being cared for within a patronage system to having to fend for themselves by creating their own entrepreneurial models.

Borrowed Fire suggests that Krishnankutty's ardent commitment to the tradition grew from losing his father at 17, driving him to seek guidance in the art on his own (*Borrowed Fire* 2000). This kind of personal initiative is not always present with practitioners of inherited traditions today, although it may be important for ensuring these forms' survival. Watching *Borrowed Fire*, one can imagine that once Krishnankutty, already elderly and frail on camera, passes away, his sons might let the tradition go. However, since his father's death in January 2000, Ramachandra has embraced his leadership role and put the company on a relatively thriving path, maintaining the traditional art while also taking it into new artistic territory, following a path Krishnankutty first opened up.

Eclectic strategies for renewal

In 1969, already seeing the thinning crowds and his children's ambivalence about continuing the tradition, Krishnankutty took a significant and unprecedented step in creating the first version of the troupe's Ramayana performance to take outside

the temple grounds.⁷ The initial show was done for the Kerala government in Trivandrum (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013). The artists reduced the marathon epic to one hour, focusing on the main tale and its dramatic highlights. The presentation was appreciated by the audience and covered by several newspapers, allowing the company to offer this shorter presentation again on other occasions. In 1979 the troupe made its first international appearance at a UNIMA⁸ puppetry festival in the USSR at the behest of Meher Contractor, an important figure in Indian puppetry.⁹ Ramachandra attributes his own renewed commitment to the family art to this international tour and the experience of seeing puppetry appreciated within a wider global and artistic context (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013).

Of the five existing *tolpavakoothu* troupes today, Krishnankutty's is the only one to have moved outside the temples. Some members of other companies and locals have been critical of this move, feeling it debases the art, but Ramachandra points out what Blackburn's study already suggested: that other companies on the whole no longer have disciples (either their own children or other young people in the community) continuing the tradition. Absent Ramachandra's troupe of about ten, including his own children, Rajeev, Rajitha, and Rahul, the traditional art would soon die out. It seems that the company's new work outside the temples, both the shortened version of the Ramayana and other projects that I will describe later on, as well as the visibility and interest it generates in puppetry, is sustaining the traditional practices and the tradition's future as a whole.

Krishnankutty brought one more significant change to the tradition. The family shows off with pride their now-aged palm leaf manuscripts of the *Kamba Ramayana*, the text the puppeteers memorize and recite. But in performance they have always veered away from Kampan's text or added to it. Blackburn's intricately documented study of the practice shows "that the puppeteers do not 'tell' Kampan's Rāma story as much as they explain it" (Blackburn 1996: 178). Krishnankutty notably wrote down the first full record of the text of the play as it actually takes place in the long ritual performances. This record is invaluable for preserving and recording the form. But in a largely unprecedented change, Ramachandra's children and other disciples can, if need be, rely on the written text during traditional performances, not just for reference but also to read from. Reading parts of the text changes the performers' relationship to it and truncates the deeper understanding and elaborations of it that have always been the *pulavar's* charge.

In the past puppeteers would have been embarrassed in front of their colleagues if they didn't know the text by heart, but Ramachandra's children were not subjected to the same rigorous early-morning memorization sessions as their father. With the many other commitments of today's young puppeteers, including formal education and full-time jobs, and the dwindling interest of performers willing to dedicate themselves to the form, the tradition must accept accommodations if it is to continue.

Ramachandra notes that, concomitantly, some of the show's songs are sung more quickly now than in the past and sound different. During my interview in July 2013, an impromptu visit by Sreedharan Nair, an 85-year-old man who had performed 65 years earlier but hadn't continued, corroborated this view. He sang the verses at the speed and in the musical style he remembered while Ramachandra made notes on his rendition. Sreedharan Nair also relied on the written text to jog

his memory before launching into his chanting. The text is the same, but the songs have become more rapid over time.

Outside the four-month season of temple performances, *tolpavakoothu* performers have always sustained themselves with other work, usually farming. Today the Pulavars have left commercial farming, now growing crops only to meet their own needs. While Ramachandra's older children have regular jobs, he has dropped his other employment to cultivate puppetry as a full-time endeavor. He works instead to promote his art and translate his traditional skills into new creative and commercial arenas.

Whereas in the 1980s Blackburn lamented that "when the puppets become damaged, new ones are no longer manufactured because the skin (of deer and buffalo) has become too expensive and the skill of puppet making too rare" (Blackburn 1996: 178), today Ramachandra's family has discovered commercial value in puppet-making. They all know how to craft puppets and regularly create new ones for performance and for sale to tourists and puppet enthusiasts.¹⁰ With their leather-crafting skills they produce other merchandise, too, such as lampshades and key chains. Moreover, whereas previously women played no role in the *tolpavakoothu* tradition, Ramachandra has enlisted his wife and other female family members in the production of leather goods, distributing among more hands the meticulous labor required, increasing the family income, and giving women the opportunity to master puppet-crafting skills.

The family also teaches puppet-making to others. In January 2011 they offered a one-day workshop to students on the Hunter College Education Abroad program in India, just after hosting a small troupe of French performers who spent several weeks with them learning to build and perform. These workshops are not just attractive to foreign artists. In July 2013 students from Shristi Arts and Design College in Bangalore worked with the Pulavars, while sharing their own skills in technology and lighting with the puppeteers. The Pulavars may draw on this new technology in future shows of their own. Ramachandra's blog (another new practice for puppeteers, along with using Facebook and creating websites to promote their work), dated March 11, 2013, lists the following additional teaching experiences [sic]:

- Trained 10 persons on behalf of Delhi handicrafts in 1995 in leather puppet craft.
- Trained 40 school-teachers in CCRT New Delhi for about 10 years regularly.
- Conduct demonstration in many schools in Kerala.
- Participated every year *pragathi* maiden national handicraft museum, New Delhi from 1980 to 1995.

(Pulavar 2013)

By running workshops that help support them financially, the Pulavars spread the knowledge of their traditional carving skills as they master new pedagogical skills of their own.

The ability to carve new puppets and perform outside the temples has allowed the Pulavars to create and expand their repertoire with shows on novel themes beyond the Ramayana. Their first foray in this direction was in 2000, with a production based on the Indian animal fables of the *Panchatantra*.¹¹ This show capitalized on the company's traditional animal figures. More ambitious was a commission in 2007, when the troupe finally did take up the theme of Gandhi's life. This project brought

them out of the world of fable and mythology to deal with historical material. New puppets for the show included motorcars, guns, airplanes, and contemporary figures in modern dress. The Pulavar's *Gandhi* might not allay Singh's concerns about addressing new themes with traditional puppetry, but it challenged them to expand their techniques as they adapted a modern story for presentation. It also opened up to them additional performance opportunities in schools and elsewhere.

In 2012, the family created another new play, this one about Jesus Christ. Kerala boasts a strong Christian population, with accounts, true or apocryphal, of conversions going back to a first-century visit to Kerala from the apostle Thomas himself, and there are churches in the region that continue to sing hymns in Aramaic. Ramachandra's Hindu troupe created the show in consultation with local Catholic priests and, as of July 2013, had presented it at 25 Kerala churches (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013). Dealing with Christian themes in the context of Christian churches truly takes them outside their ritual work for the Hindu goddess but also connects them with different local communities.

In 2012, Ramachandra's son Rajeev created his own new production about the Demon King Mahābali, elaborating on an episode that is itself folded into the puppeteer's traditional telling of the Ramayana (Blackburn 1996: 140–143). This project reflects the third path Singh outlines, expanding the repertoire but staying within the world of myth. An audience of several hundred attentively watched the show at a local fair near Shornur in January 2011, very close to the puppeteers' home.¹² This kind of audience presence, unheard of at the temple shows, renews the puppeteers' and the community's engagement with the work. It is especially invigorating for young puppeteers like Rajeev. He plans another new work, based on a Shakespeare



Figure 19.2 Ramachandra Pulavar (center) with his family, holding up both new and traditional *tolpavakoothu* puppets, Kerala, India (July 22, 2013). Photo courtesy of the author

play, and he told me he is eager to expand his puppetry techniques by studying abroad (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013).

To date, in designing new productions, the puppeteers have retained the basic elements of their tradition: the wide shadow screen, intricately carved and painted leather puppets, chanted storytelling, and explanations between the puppeteers during performances. But the novel themes allow them to reach out to different audiences in previously unexploited venues, such as schools, churches, and local fairs. It promotes the art of shadow puppetry – traditional and contemporary – while offering new fare to spectators and to performers, who now have a chance to develop their own creativity.

The puppeteers went even farther afield in January 2011 when they performed with the contemporary acting company Lokadharmi in *Lanka Lakshmi*, a 1974 play by C. N. Sreekantan Nair, directed by Chandradasan. The story is based on events in the Ramayana involving Sita's rescue. Here human actors played the central characters, performing in a heightened realistic style. The puppeteers, behind an upstage screen, presented the battle scenes using all their traditional skills. Although the puppeteers' work itself diverged little from their usual practice, this novel venture, initiated by the director, occurred within a very different genre and context and reached contemporary theatre-going audiences at a local Cochin venue designed for modern theatre. Ramachandra says he would consider doing another similar project, should the opportunity arise, showing his continued interest in staking out new ground for his art (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013).

The truncated one-hour Ramayana continues to be popular and profitable for the company during the off-season from regular temple performances. The upper floor of the family home serves as a performance space for anyone wishing to commission a show, as my students and I have done on several occasions. In July 2013, however, I witnessed the space host the familiar performance for a more specific ritual purpose. A troubled family from Trivandrum, over 160 miles away, was advised by an astrologer to offer a *tolpavakoothu* presentation as a *puja*, or form of ritual worship, to alleviate their situation. (The astrologer did not know the Pulavars and had never seen a shadow play himself.) The performance on this occasion, though not at the temple, included special prayers, fires, and offerings of food and cloth wraps for the puppet figures.

New opportunities for women

When Krishnankutty moved shadow puppetry out of the temples, he opened another important door for the transformation of his art. The sacred temple venue had always prohibited women from acting as puppeteers. As Dr. F. Seltmann states:

Only the male members of the family are connected with the profession of shadow play. Women have nothing to do with it; they should not come in touch with the figures, and they are not allowed to enter the special area where the performances will go on.¹³

(Seltmann 1982: 11)



Figure 19.3 Backstage after an off-season ritual *tolpavakoothu* performance: the puppet of Hanuman wears a *dhoti* cloth given as an offering; Kerala, India (July 21, 2013). Photo courtesy of the author

One explanation for this, offered to me by Ramachandra's daughter, Rajitha, is that the goddess herself wishes to be the main female presence at the show (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013). But there are many regulations and prescriptions concerning women in Hinduism, especially keeping them from sacred areas and practices when they are menstruating, so this prohibition is not surprising. Ramachandra, however, has extended the role of women in the form beyond also involving them in puppet building. Today Rajitha performs alongside her brothers in shows done outside the temple grounds. She is also, like her mother and aunt, an excellent puppet-maker and in 2013 was awarded a two-year grant from the Sangeet Natak Akademi to create a new show of her own, using her traditional skills. Her show, she says, might focus on women's issues (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013).

Ramachandra is generous about letting women from abroad who are interested in puppetry accompany him to the drama-house. However, he relates a story to me about one such visitor, the only spectator at the time to watch with rapt attention for the full seven days of a performance, who was the cause for a particular temple to discontinue inviting his troupe for future shows (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013). Nonetheless, Ramachandra persists in sharing his art in a multitude of ways rather than sequestering it, promulgating opportunities for future life.

Ramachandra's acceptance of women in the tradition may derive partly from necessity (i.e., the need to enlist all family members in the work and its economic pursuits). But it is also timely, reflecting larger changes taking place for Indian women. According to a global poll of experts, "Infanticide, child marriage and slavery make India the worst" country to be a woman among the world's leading economies

(Baldwin 2012: 1). Nonetheless, more and more women in India's changing economy are entering the workforce, often in technically skilled jobs, and moving to urban environments, away from family strictures and traditional lifestyles. In so doing, they are embracing new ways of living and new professions, transforming their own and India's future.

While *tolpavakoothu* temple performances remain off-limits to women performers, Rajitha suggests that it may be only a matter of time before she and other women are accepted in temple shows (R. Pulavar, pers. comm., July 22, 2013). As master performers die off, leaving no disciples behind, Rajitha and her brothers will end up among the few, if not the only, living inheritors of the temple form. Those who want to receive blessings from sponsoring these shows may have little choice but to accept a female performer.

Conclusion

The Pulavars of Kerala, like many traditional artists and craftspeople in India, by virtue of inheriting a long-standing tradition, are also inevitably its caretakers. It is ultimately left to them, even with strong government or other support, to endeavor to sustain their art or not. Whereas in the past the pursuit of the profession of puppetry for *tolpavakoothu* family members went unquestioned, now each new generation needs motivation to continue in work whose original cultural purpose and footing have eroded, even though temple performances currently persist. Many older puppeteers throughout India see, and sometimes encourage, their children to abandon puppetry for more lucrative and contemporarily relevant careers. Ramachandra, by contrast, in line with his father, has thrown his lot in with puppetry, exploiting his skills and knowledge in new directions, hoping to make the family inheritance more enticing to his children. To do this he has become an experimental artist and savvy entrepreneur, seeking out new opportunities and developing new skills in the process. He is mastering new media – webpages, blogs, Facebook – to advertise his work and has even become an author, with an upcoming Malayalam-language book on *tolpavakoothu*.

It may not be easy for a traditionally trained, rural performer like Ramachandra, tasked from an early age with memorizing thousands of verses and carefully crafting designs in leather, to also become a computer-savvy, enterprising businessman. It may also not even be desirable for artists to become entrepreneurs. But today's cultural realities, in India as elsewhere, may demand this of them if they hope to sustain their art. Ramachandra is trying to do it all. He models his practice for others and invites fellow artists, some who have not developed these skills on their own, into programs he organizes, sharing performance and networking opportunities with them.

The Pulavars may have an advantage in balancing their traditional art with new performance forms and opportunities. The sacred context for *tolpavakoothu* is so circumscribed by its seasonal time, temple location, and repertoire that new experiments can be fairly clearly demarcated from the tradition. Still, temple performances necessarily change in these circumstances. True mastery of the form and the difficult texts and explanations required for it fall away when artists attend to other demands.

Will performers continue to know, and audience members to appreciate, the deep philosophical knowledge and interpretive skills that have been the true accomplishment of the *pulavar*?

Tolpavakoothu performers are not alone in being caught between making compromises to sustain their tradition and trying to adhere to the rigorous demands and precedents of their art. Traditional artists have been performing this balancing act for quite some time. Today the Pulavars choose to venture down many paths at once in their work, hoping this multifaceted approach will both sustain and enrich the tradition for the next generation. In the end, *tolpavakoothu*, if it survives, falls into their hands.

Notes

- 1 The company's website <<http://puppetry.org.in/index.html>> offers information on performance schedule, the puppetry form, and how to contact the performers, who are grateful for any opportunities for commissioned performances, workshops, and other ventures.
- 2 My interview with Ramachandra Pulavar on July 22, 2013 provides a good deal of important information for this chapter. Additional material is also based on my many encounters with him and his family and the viewing of his performances, both traditional temple presentations and other works, during six separate month-long trips to India since January 2008. I am grateful to Hunter College President Jennifer Raab's Presidential Travel Awards that have helped to support my research.
- 3 The text dates from the twelfth century (Blackburn 1996: 1).
- 4 Stuart Blackburn's book *Inside the Drama-House: Rama Stories and Shadow Puppets in South India* (1996) offers, among other important contributions, an excellent, in-depth study of how Kamban's text is and is not followed within the puppetry tradition.
- 5 Rama represents the ideal man and king in Hindu culture, and his exploits, as he is exiled from his palace home to the forest and then ultimately gains his rightful position as King of Ayodhya, is the subject of the Ramayana. Ravana's abduction of Sita and the battle to save her, which brings the monkey god Hanuman and his armies into the tale as Rama's allies, is at the center of the Ramayana, and innumerable traditions through South and Southeast Asia draw on these episodes as material for performance.
- 6 Ramachandra says that in order to learn these verses, his father woke them up every day at 4:30 a.m. He put 400 stones in a bowl and removed one stone each time a verse was recited. After 400 repetitions, the verse was memorized.
- 7 He did this with the help of Gopal Venu, who has been instrumental in the preservation and development of many Kerala performance traditions, notably *kutiyattam*.
- 8 UNIMA is the Union Internationale de la Marionnette, the international organization for puppetry, founded in 1929, which is the oldest international arts organization in the world, with chapters in more than 40 countries.
- 9 For further information on Contractor, see my chapter in *Gender, Space and Resistance: Women and Theatre in India*, (Orenstein 2013: 245–272).
- 10 Traditional puppeteers around the world make puppets for tourists as a way of enhancing their income. In some cases performance itself flounders, as puppet sales become the main support for puppeteers. This was true for many years in Burma, before a recent revival, and for some puppeteer families in China.
- 11 The *Panchatantra* is a collection of ancient animal fables, originally compiled in Sanskrit, probably around the third to fifth centuries BCE, that teaches moral values.
- 12 I personally observed this performance.
- 13 Both the men and women in my group were invited into the puppet house to try out the puppets.

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