The Brimming Vessel: An Analysis of the Ritual Repertoire of the *Miḻāvu* from a Tantric Perspective

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The *miḻāvu* is a large pot drum that was, until few decades ago, exclusively used in *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* Sanskrit theater. Its history, language, and repertoire have been fashioned upon the performance of *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* dramas and rituals, which were enacted in Brahmanical temples of the South Indian state of Kerala for the exclusive benefit of a privileged elite. Due to these audience restrictions, *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* remained almost unknown to the rest of the world until the 1960s, when radical political changes produced a revolution in Kerala's social organization that had a significant impact on this theatrical art form and temple arts in general (S. Gopalakrishnan 2011; Moser 2013).[1] The newly established communist government confiscated lands belonging to temples and redistributed them among the lower castes of the society, and the temple communities (*ambalavāsi*) who previously earned from the products of those lands were suddenly deprived of that source of income. Several groups of temple servants had to give up their traditional activities and look for new jobs. Among them were the *Cākyār*s and *Nambyār*s, respectively *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* actors and *miḻāvu* players, whose families had been associated with temples for centuries with the exclusive right to perform and transmit this art to members of their communities.

During several centuries of association with temples where a particular form of Tantrism was practiced by *Nambūdiri* Brahmins, *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* had been heavily charged with ritual elements (K. K. Gopalakrishnan 2016; S. Gopalakrishnan 2011; Paulose 1994). *Cākyār*s and *Nambyār*s, who held a high-rank caste among temple communities because of their roles in ritual, were at a crossroad: they could keep the art to themselves, bringing it certain death, or adjust to the new social context, giving up their exclusive rights to it and thus even performing it outside temples. A new phase in the history and evolution of the art began in 1965, when a department of *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* was introduced at the dance and theater academy Kerala Kalamandalam. There, the art was made available to all Kalamandalam students without caste restrictions. Thanks to the efforts of the eminent masters Painkulam Rama Cākyār and P. K. Narayanan Nambyār, the practice was adapted and refined; in 2001 *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* was recognized as a World Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO (S. Gopalakrishnan 2011; Richmond 2011; Moser 2013; K. K. Gopalakrishnan 2016; Lowthorp 2020). Today *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* is a complex art form, which includes elements and procedures inherited from the ancient Sanskrit theatrical tradition as well as finely elaborated stage rituals, which were adjusted to meet and suit the needs and tastes of contemporary audiences.

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1. The first showing of *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* for an invited audience was organized by All India Radio at Kozhikode in 1960. It was followed by a series of other presentations in Kerala (Kalamandalam 1962), Madras (1963), New Delhi (Sangeet Natak Akademi 1964), and again in Kerala (1966) during a conference sponsored by the Kerala Kalamandalam and the American Institute of Indian Studies (Jones 1973; K. K. Gopalakrishnan 2016; Moser 2013).

While much has been written in both English and Malayalam on various aspects of *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ*, such as the textual tradition, the staging and dramatic techniques, and the *kūttambalam* (the special type of theater built for a temple complex), scholarly contributions on the music and musical instruments are quite scarce (Jones 1973; Unni 1977; Sullivan 1995a, 1995b; Rajagopalan 2000; S. Gopalakrishnan 2011; Moser 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013). Furthermore, while the ritual aspects have been thoroughly studied from the perspective of the actor (*Cākyār*) and the actresses (*Naṅgyār*), and in relation to the ancient treatise on theater, the Nāṭyaśāstra, and Vedic sacrifice, the point of view of the drummer (*Nambyār*) has been neglected (Nair 1994b; Sullivan 1995a, 1995b; Rajagopalan 1997; Rajagopalan 2000; Paniker 2005; Unni 2006; Śliwczyńska 2007; Naṅgyār 2010; Moser 2011a, 2011b; Daugherty 2016; Mucciarelli and Oberlin 2019).

Considering both the important ritual meaning and aesthetic role traditionally attributed to the *miḻāvu* in *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ*, this scarcity is striking.[2] Furthermore, this drumming tradition differs from the classical musical traditions of India because its approach to rhythm is almost exclusively based on the actions performed by actors on the scene and—with the exception of the ritual compositions, which are the focus of this article—devoid of the pre-composed patterns based on mathematical formulae which characterize the repertoire of the drums *mṛdaṅgam*, *pakhavaj*, and *tablā*. In fact, during the staging of a drama *miḻāvu* players improvise, their playing providing a sonic representation to the facial expressions, bodily movements, and emotions enacted by the actors on the scene. Dynamics, density of drum strokes and a wide palette of timbres are the main resources drummers may adopt to sonically depict a character. Thus, for instance, fast sequences of strokes played loud may represent either a king and his power, an elephant, or a huge mountain, while phrases played loud but with a calm and majestic gait sonically represent important and powerful characters. Phrases played slow and quietly evoke high-rank female characters, and the skillful rubbing of the drum skin may reproduce the breath of a dying animal. This kind of improvisation, which primarily intends to express the energetic quality and intensity of the characters or to describe some actions through sound, flows according to a set of rhythmic cycles (*tāla*s)[3] traditionally associated with specific emotions, and it is only occasionally interrupted by the rendition of

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2. The most important contribution in English has been provided by S. L. Rajagopalan with two articles: "Music in *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ*" (1994) on musical aspects in general, and "The *Miḻāvu*" (2010), a short essay devoted to the drum. Another interesting article focused on the *rāga*s, "*Svāras in Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ*" (1994) was written by Painkulam Rama Cākyār and explains the use of *rāga*s according to manuals. The most extended and detailed writing on music in *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* is "Rhythm and Music" (1994) by P. K. Narayanan Nambyār. Although enlightening and useful for understanding the theoretical approach and the basic rules governing the music in *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ*, none of these sources provides a description of the practical aspects of music. *Mizhavu: Nambyarute Kramadipika* (2005) by P. K. Narayanan Nambyār and Isvaranunni's *Miḻāvoli* (2010) are important texts in Malayalam providing useful and clarifying information on *miḻāvu* playing and notation of part of its repertoire.

3. The term *tāla* in *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* indicates a meter—conceived as a cycle—subdivided into a variable number of beats (*mātrā*s) whose structure is indicated by means of claps of the hands and counts by the fingers. The set of *tāla*s used in *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* and their names slightly vary according to the source. Presently, the most frequently played *tāla*s are *tripuṭa* (7 beats), *ēka* (4 beats), *aṭanta* (14 beats), and *muṛukiya tripuṭa* (3.5 beats). *Tāla*s may be played in three different speeds (*laya*)—*vilambita* (slow), *madhya* (medium), or *druta* (fast) *laya*—and are rendered on the *miḻāvu* by means of sequences of strokes indicated by syllables (*vāyattāri*s) in the Malayalam alphabet.

pre-composed patterns that are linked with precise steps of the actors called *cārī*s.[4] An important consequence of this theatrical approach to drumming is that the general structure of the performance does not follow the widespread Indian structure based on a progressive increase of intensity and rhythmic density (Henry 2002) that is also crucial to Kerala temple musical forms, but instead develops in accordance with the emotions enacted in the scene and the performers' interpretation.

It is also striking to note the lack of academic studies on the influence of Tantric culture on this dramatic art nurtured for centuries in Brahmanical temples of Kerala. Indeed, in this land—as in most of South India—Tantrism has been institutionalized as the official form of temple worship (Flood 1996; Freeman 1994; Unni 2014) and *tantri*s, or highest priests, are *Nambūdiri* Brahmans whose right is maintained on the basis of their access to the Veda, the oldest and most authoritative scriptures of Hinduism (Unni 2014; Freeman 1994). Tantrism is a pan-Asian religious phenomenon spread over numerous centuries and including a wide number of sects having different and even contradictory philosophical and theological approaches and practices. Ritual worship in Brahmanical temples of Kerala combines Vedic and Tantric sacred utterances (*mantra*s), methods and rules, but the Tantric elements are slightly dominant over the Vedic (Unni 2014, xvii; Flood 1996). Unlike the esoteric Tantric traditions practiced in the cremation grounds of North India, the Tantric practices in Kerala's Brahmanical temples do not make use of substances considered impure such as meat, alcohol, and blood, and do not include animal sacrifice.[5] Notwithstanding its being embedded within Vedic orthopraxy which revered the Veda as revelation, this form of Tantrism incorporates in its worship a number of mainstream Brahmanical Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava deities as well as low-caste minor local gods and goddesses (Flood 1996; Unni 2014).

MEANINGLESS AND MEANINGFULNESS OF THE RITUAL: CONTEMPORARY PERFORMERS' VIEW AND MUSICAL ANALYSIS[6]

Every *Kūṭiyāṭṭaṃ* drama must commence with a sequence of ritual pieces called *puṟappāṭu* that includes compositions for solo *miḻāvu*, a few songs, and a series of dances

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4. The main playing strategies adopted by *miḻāvu* players in the staging of a drama have been studied by the author (Pacciolla 2020b).

5. According to Flood (1996) and Unni (2014), although the texts and the tradition are temple-based and practiced by respectable householders, they still reflect an archaic Tantric world view with roots in esoteric asceticism. In a few temples rituals that are considered inferior, including animal sacrifice, are still practiced (Prajith 2008, 8.43).

6. The issue of meaning in rituals has been addressed from different points of view and disciplines and can hardly be briefly summarized. Since my interpretation is exclusively based on Tantrism, I focus on the question of the meaning in Tantric ritual. This topic has been extensively treated by Sanderson (1995) and Törzsök (2007), who have argued the importance of speculation on the meaning of rituals in Tantric texts and exegesis, pointing out how such meaning changes according to different soteriological approaches and perspectives. The question of the meaning of music has been similarly approached in a variety of ways and from different perspectives (Clayton 2001; Cross 2005; Cross and Hallam 2008; Widdess 2012). In this essay I study the function and meaning of the *miḻāvu* compositions and the entire *puṟappāṭu* from the perspective of Tantra. In my approach they are Tantric rituals, thus their meaning ultimately coincides with Tantric ideas, and in particular with ideas of the Tantric tradition of Kerala.

accompanied by *miḷāvu* and cymbals (*ilattāḷam*). I contend that the ritual importance of the *miḷāvu* as well as the influence of Tantric practices may be observed in this introductory *puṟappāṭu*; as a precomposed section, it contrasts sharply with the ensuing drama in which a story is narrated and improvisation dominates. Analysis of the musical compositions included in the *puṟappāṭu* suggests a novel interpretation of the overall *puṟappāṭu* from the perspective of Kerala Tantra. In particular, passages created by means of progressive reduction of rhythmic units reveal visual content that corroborates the information provided by other forms of Brahmanical temple music. In order to visualize the figures produced by this compositional method, I have adopted a simple strategy that consists of notating each one of the phrases in a sequence aligned on a vertical axis. This axis corresponds to the *brahmasūtra*, the vertical median line that represents the pull of gravity and the earth–sky principle and is the most important line for carving idols or painting deities according to treatises of Hindu iconography (Vatsyayan 1997, 107). This procedure reveals a series of triangles hidden in music. The numerical character of such geometrical figures suggests numerous symbolic associations.

Although this visual content is not mentioned by contemporary *miḷāvu* players,[7] the association of music with images is not unusual in Kerala.[8] Furthermore, most Brahmanical temple music follows a typical compositional structure based on stages of metrical compression that is commonly associated with a pyramid or with temples' towers.[9] This association is so well rooted that scholar and performer Dr. T. N. Vasudevan, while sharing with me some of his views on this genre of music, said that most of the temples of Kerala do not have brick towers but sonic towers.[10]

Although, as I will argue, musical analysis points out strong Tantric contents, contemporary performers do not recognize Tantric influences on *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ*. Indeed, during my fieldwork, the influence of Tantra on aspects of the art were acknowledged only by two distinguished performers and scholars: P. K. Narayanan Nambyār and Usha Naṅgyār. P. K. Narayanan Nambyār, the octogenarian and most eminent and knowledgeable representative of the *miḷāvu* tradition, emphasized the importance of Tantric rituals performed in order to install the drum in a temple theater, adding that many aspects and even parts of the repertoire were lost because masters did not share them with their pupils (interview, April 14, 2018). Usha

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7. In fact, the presence of visual content in compositions was pointed out only by P. K. Narayanan Nambyār. See the section "Triangles and Triads" below.

8. Most ritual performances of Kerala include visual aspects—from the drawing of images with colored powders on the floor in *Kaḷameḻuttu*, to the gorgeous face painting, costumes, and headgears of *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ*, *Kathakali*, *Mudiyēṭṭu, Teyyāṭṭam*—and are closely related to music that works as an enlivening force.

9. According to Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār, this composition structure is a typical feature of Brahmanical temple music of Kerala (interview, April 15, 2018). Thrikkaripuram Krishankutty Mārār maintains that all the percussion musical forms have been arranged in a pyramidal order. In his book on *pañcavādyam*, K. N. Namboodiri (2012, 30) represents compositional structure as a pyramid. Groesbeck (1995, 378) reports that V. V. Balaraman provided him with a sketch of the structure of compositional form *tāyampaka* represented as a pyramid, and Killius (2006, 61) writes that the *pañcavādyam* artist Pallavur Maniyan Mārār compared *mēlam*'s and *pañcavādyam*'s structure with the towers of the Dravidian temples, whose shape is similar to a pyramid.

10. T. N. Vasudevan is retired Professor of Physics at the University of Calicut and the elder member of a family of traditional performers of *Tiyyāṭiyāṭṭam*, a ritual performance devoted to the god Ayyappa (interview, June 5, 2019).

Naṅgyār, a leading exponent of the female solo form of *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* known as *Naṅgyār kūttu* and member of the teaching faculty in the Department of Theatre at Sree Sankaracharya Sanskrit University Kalady, was keen to tell me that the dance steps performed by actors in *puṟappāṭu* are pure dances and hence have no meaning.[11] But, at the same time, Naṅgyār emphasized that evidence of Tantric influences in *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* may be found in other ritual sections of the repertoire.[12] Her main regret was the lack of a clear transmission of information from masters about these aspects. She added that students were not told about such aspects and it was only with her generation that pupils started asking questions to their masters about their art. Indeed, she suggested this as a possible reason for the loss of precise information about ritual meaning.[13]

Contemporary *miḻāvu* players are focused on evolving the language of the drum and adapting it to the needs of contemporary performances rather than on its ritual aspects inherited though tradition and respected without questioning.[14] They learn that the purpose of the ritual compositions is to communicate to gods that the drama is going to be staged. In fact, the presence of the gods is needed to protect the drama from evil forces.[15] The actors I interviewed confirmed the drummers' explanation regarding the purpose of the ritual section, and maintained that the steps they perform are pure dances devoid of meaning. Both Raman Cākyār, one of the most authoritative representatives of the community, and Rajeev Cākyār, a well-known performer, agreed on the meaninglessness of dances in the ritual section and, in particular, on the meaninglessness of the dance steps in one of the most important sections of the entire *puṟappāṭu*, the *maṟayil kriyā*.[16]

From the above information it can be inferred that *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* performers perform the rituals according to the dictates of the tradition and, although they think they are meaningless, they expect such rituals to produce certain effects.[17] In other words, it can be said that they believe in the ritual power and in the efficacy of the pure sequence of actions they received from their masters. The analysis of the ritual compositions for *miḻāvu* and dances has led me to different conclusions. Indeed, I maintain that the ritual repertoire of the *miḻāvu* drum and the entire *puṟappāṭu* have both function and meaning, which can be evinced through analysis of their structure and performance from the perspective of Kerala Tantra and by considering other aspects of both temple culture and Kerala culture in general.

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11. Usha Naṅgyār was referring in particular to *maṟayil kriyā*, a dance performed by the actor in front of the drum to pay respect to it.

12. In *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* or *Naṅgyār kūttu* performances the actor narrates the story and then transforms himself into the characters. According to Naṅgyār, the hand gestures performed by the actor/actress before transforming into the characters of the story have a Tantric meaning (interview, July 15, 2019).

13. Naṅgyār suggested that even her master might have been unaware of ritual meanings for the same reason.

14. None of the *miḻāvu* players I spoke with provided any personal interpretation of the structure of the compositions in the *puṟappāṭu* and the ideas associated with it.

15. I was provided with the same explanation by P. K. Narayanan Nambyār (interview, April 14, 2018) and Usha Naṅgyār (2010, 134) proposes the same concept in an article on *puṟappāṭu*.

16. Sowle (1982, 180) also reports that the *Cākyār*s do not assign any meaning to the *maṟayil kriyā*.

17. This is the point of view of the *Mīmāṃsā* school of Indian philosophy which maintains that rituals have to be performed for their own sake (Staal 1979, 6).

There is not clear evidence to establish when the *puṟappāṭu*'s current structure coalesced, and similarly, we cannot ascertain whether past performers transmitted a symbolic meaning of the ritual preliminaries along with their technical aspects and procedures. Considering the difficulties faced by the *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* tradition over the last almost two centuries, the loss of parts of the repertoire,[18] and the pervading presence of symbolic meaning in the different aspects of Brahmanical temple culture of Kerala from the various parts of the building of the temple and the theater, to the various rituals performed by *tantri*s (Jayashanker 1997; Rajagopalan 2000), it is reasonable to think that the transmission of such symbolic information was there but that it gradually faded away. Both actors and drummers occupied the highest positions in the community hierarchy of Brahmanic temples; thus, at least some of them might have been acquainted with symbolical meanings attached to compositions and choreographies. In fact, even other temple traditions of Kerala faced a similar problem. For instance, members of the *Mārār* community of temple musicians, whose duty has for centuries been to play music for the gods, still maintain most of their repertoire but have almost completely forgotten the symbolic aspects behind their music.[19] However, despite the decline of the tradition, according to Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār, one of the most knowledgeable and respected representative of the community, *Mārār* music may be explained through Tantric concepts, with the help of manuscripts written by *Mārār*s in previous centuries.[20] His claim is echoed by Pallatheri Nambiathan Nambūdiri (2006), a Brahman scholar of Kerala temple music, who acknowledges that both his *Mārār* and *Nambūdiri* teachers provided him with interpretations based on Tantras.[21]

In this essay, I argue that the function or purpose of the *puṟappāṭu*—in all its parts including solo *miḻāvu* compositions, songs, and dances—is to re-enact the universal manifestation, the unfolding of the universe from a single point of sonic energy, as narrated in Tantric texts. I consider the cluster of ideas, symbols, stories, and rites that have been associated in the Brahmanical temple tradition of Kerala with the *miḻāvu* and its compositions, as well as with the songs and dances included in the *puṟappāṭu*, as the meaning of the ritual. In my view, while function relates to the purpose of music or dance, meaning is the theoretical frame which explains why they are performed. In the specific case of *puṟappāṭu*, while its function is to reproduce the manifestation of the universe, its meaning, resulting from the

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18. Not only did P. K. Narayanan Nambyār and Usha Naṅgyār point out the loss of parts of the repertoire, but Raman Cākyār also told me that Painkulam Rama Cākyār had rectified some steps that according to him had been transmitted in a wrong form (interview, June 20, 2019).

19. Members of both *Nambyār* and *Mārār* castes serve as temple musicians in Kerala. While *Nambyār*s played exclusively in theaters built in temple complexes, *Mārār*s' music is a crucial element of most of the rituals performed in Brahmanical temples of Kerala.

20. I had extensive conversations with Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār, and he always emphasized the importance of Tantra in his tradition and the decadence that it has been facing over the last century (interviews held on August 1, 2018, and June 16, 2019).

21. In fact, in his manuscript on *marappāṇi*, the most important Brahmanical temples ritual involving drumming, Pallatheri Nambiathan Nambūdiri (2006) provides an interesting interpretation mostly based on Tantric ideas and texts such as the Tantrasamuccaya, the fifteenth-century Tantric text that is still the main reference manual for Brahmanical temple worship in Kerala.

sequence of the single units of drumming, singing, and dancing, is a Tantric cosmological theory. In other words, I consider the *puṟappāṭu* a text written by means of different arts: a text embedded in actions whose performance is a form of knowing. Indeed, I agree with Widdess (2012), who argues that meanings in music are often non-linguistic and reflect foundational schemas specific to the culture to which they belong, and I suggest that, although most of the ideas and symbols necessary to unveil the function of the *puṟappāṭu* and its sections have lost their verbal explanation due to a break in the transmission of the tradition, they may still be recovered at least partially, since they have been embedded in the forms of music and dance. In fact, it is my contention that musical forms and choreographies still maintain hidden in their structure those ideas and symbols. Furthermore, I maintain that those ideas and symbols may be approached and partially pointed out by means of performance analysis, and with the support of ethnographic research and the information provided by textual and visual sources.

I will analyze the most significant compositions in the ritual repertoire of the *miḻāvu* by utilizing the traditional notation based on the English transliteration of drum mnemonics as well as staff notation, since each of these will allow me to highlight specific aspects and ideas that would otherwise remain unseen or inadequately observed.

In the following, I will introduce the drum and briefly describe the entire sequence of the ritual section; then I will proceed with the musical analysis of selected compositions and compositional procedures, pointing out significant specific features and aspects. On the basis of those elements, I will argue that the entire sequence of the *puṟappāṭu* may be interpreted as the ritual re-enactment of the manifestation of the universe from a Tantric perspective.

The *Miḻāvu*

The present day *miḻāvu* is an ovoid pot made of copper, with a hole in the body to give proper resonance and calf skin stretched over the mouth.[22] It is alternatively called *mṛdaṅga* (body [*aṅga*] of mud or clay [*mṛd*]) since once it was made of clay. In order to be played, the *miḻāvu* is positioned in a wooden stand that keeps it suspended from the floor and provides a seat for the musician (Figure 1). According to legend, the *miḻāvu* is a self-generated instrument that emerged out of the earth in Muzhakunnu, a village in Kannur district (Nambyār 2005; Isvaranunni 2010). In that place was built a temple devoted to the goddess Porkāli (an alternative local name for Kāli), and the drum is believed to be an icon of her (K. K. Gopalakrishnan 2016).

Drums by the names *muḻavu*, *muḻa*, or *kudamuḻa* are mentioned in the *Sangam* literature (Hart 1975; Rajagopalan 2010; Nambyār 2005) and in the *Tēvāram*s of Śaiva saints (Viswanathan

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22. The *miḻāvu* was once made of clay, and it could be ovoid as well as spherical; its size changed according to the size of the temple theater where it was installed. The drumhead could be either of calf or of black monkey skin (Nambyār 2005; Isvaranunni 2010). There seem to be no other drums like the *miḻāvu* in contemporary India, with the exception of the *pañcamukha vādya*, a kind of *miḻāvu* with five necks covered by skins associated with a few temples of Tamil Nadu (Krishnaswami 1971).

Figure 1. From left to right, Margi Amrutha and Margi Visistha (voice, *ilattāḷam*), Margi Usha (actress), Margi Mohanan (*timila*), Margi Mahesh and Margi Saji Kumar (*miḻāvu*) at Margi, Trivandrum. This and all figures, photos, notations, and images are by the author.

2007), referring to the drum that provides the rhythm for the dance of Śiva, one of the main gods of the Hindu tradition (Zvelebil 1985).

The association with Śiva is strengthened by numerous iconographical sources. Sculptures and bas-reliefs in the neighboring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, dated from about the eighth to the thirteenth century, portray Śiva as king of dancers (Naṭarāja) accompanied by the sound of a pot drum similar to the *miḻāvu*.[23] From Kerala, where pot drums are exclusively associated with Śiva Naṭarāja, numerous temple mural paintings and wood carvings from the eighth century onwards depict the *miḻāvu* positioned in the stand and played by a musician sitting on it.[24]

Such a strong relationship of the *miḻāvu* with Naṭarāja is justified by the myth according to which Bana, a demon king, who was a fervent devotee of Śiva, played the drum for his

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23. These sculptures and bas-reliefs can be found in Tamil Nadu at Kumbakonam, Srinivasanallur, Tranquebar, Tiruvembur, and Kancipuram, and in Karnataka at Alampur, Aralanguppe, Pattadakal. The way the instruments are positioned and played clearly shows that they are pot drums covered with skin and not skinless pot drums such as the southern *ghaṭam*. According to my iconographic research, these drums are carved in court scenes accompanying female dancers only in few bas-reliefs, such as those at Pattadakal.
24. Some of the most beautiful and well-preserved representations may be seen in the Mahadeva Temples at Kandiyur (eighth century) and Ettumanur (fifteenth century), and the Śiva temple at Thodikalam (sixteenth century). Beside showing the strong relationship of the drum with Śiva, these sources clearly show that in Kerala the *miḻāvu* and the concept of the wooden stand had been perfected by the beginning of the second millennium CE.

tāṇḍava dance and was rewarded with a thousand hands by the god (Nambyār 1994; Isvaranunni 2010). But the most important proof of the deep link of the drum and *Śiva* is its identification with the god Nandikeśvara, head of Śiva's troupe and his main drummer, maintained in Kerala in the context of Brahmanical temples and *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ*. Indeed, in order to be installed, or permanently placed, in a temple theater, a *miḻāvu* has to be ritually enlivened according to a precise procedure, and Nandikeśvara has to be invoked to reside in it. P. K. Narayanan Nambyār provides a detailed description of the different ritual steps that have to be performed by a high priest (*tantri*) according to Tantric methods in order to install the consciousness (*caitanya*) of Nandikeśvara in the drum (Nambyār 2005; Rajagopalan 2010). Once the *miḻāvu* has been activated according to such procedures, it may be presented on the stage, where it is placed in the space between the doors of the green room (Jones 1973; Nambyār 2005; Rajagopalan 2010). It is at this point ready for its debut on the stage; indeed, only a *miḻāvu* that has been sanctified by the above-mentioned rites can be played in a temple theater.

Through Tantric rites Nandikeśvara is invoked to take permanent residency in the drum, transforming it into a living deity; in fact, the *miḻāvu* itself has the status of a minor deity of a temple (Rajagopalan 2010, 63), and for this reason, if it breaks or becomes defective, it has to be accorded funeral procedures as described in Tantric texts. Both P. K. Narayanan Nambyār and Isvaranunni confirmed the belief and added that the drum installed in the temple is considered a living being, observing eternal celibacy with its mind fixed on *nādabrahman*, i.e., *Brahman* (ultimate reality) in the form of sound.[25] Due to its divine status the consecrated *miḻāvu* was played only for *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* and *Kūttu*—the enactment of portions of a drama by a single character—by members of the *Nambyār* community having the caste-exclusive right to do so. For the same reason, although *miḻāvu*s are presently consecrated very rarely, students learn how to play by practicing on the *abhyāsa kuṟṟi*, a wooden hollow cylinder with a skin stretched over one end.

The *miḻāvu* produces two main sounds: the high-pitched sound *taṁ* (*takāra*) and the low-pitched *tuṁ* (*tukāra*), respectively produced by striking the center of the skin with the palm of the hand and near the rim of the drum with the fingers. They are both associated with the sacred monosyllable "oṃ" (*omkāra*) and for this reason the syllables naming them end with the *anusvāra*, ṁ, which represents the *omkāra* (Nambyār 2005). The many other sounds produced by the drum are associated with and named using syllables of the Malayalam alphabet. Among the most important strokes are *trēṁ*, produced by striking the skin with the palm of both hands almost simultaneously, like a fast acciaccatura; *taṟaha*, a group of five strokes consisting of four thirty-second notes and an eighth note; *hyākkiṁ*, a fast and soft sequence of strokes of the fingers of one hand leading to a *taṁ* played by the other hand; *ti*, a light stroke of the forefinger near the rim. The syllables associated with the different strokes produced on the *miḻāvu* are called *vāyattāri*.

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25. Interviews respectively conducted on April 14, 2018, and December 21, 2017.

THE *PUṚAPPĀṬU* AND ITS PARTS

A *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* performance is composed by two main sections, the *puṛappāṭu* (ritual introduction) and the drama. The word *puṛappāṭu* literally means "going forth" (Sowle 1982, 244) and denotes the first entrance of the important characters on the stage, presenting their main features. There are different types of *puṛappāṭu*. In order to contextualize the ritual repertoire of the *miḻāvu* I will now briefly describe the main steps of the *sūtradhāra* (stage director) *puṛappāṭu*, the most important type of *puṛappāṭu*, and the type that is performed in temples by actors in their youth as a ritual of initiation to the art.

The performance of *puṛappāṭu* in temples follows a precise program that starts with the decoration of the stage with fruit-bearing plantain trees and tender leaves of coconut trees, and with the placing of offerings on plantain leaves near the lamp at the center of the stage. The *sūtradhāra puṛappāṭu*[26] begins when the drummer (*Nambyār*) enters the stage and lights the lamp at the front of the stage, which will remain lit for the remainder of the performance. He then moves towards the back of the stage, where the *miḻāvu* is placed on its stand, and takes his seat. He salutes the drum, gently rubs the skin, and then starts playing the first composition, called *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*, "sounding the *miḻāvu*." The execution of this piece is followed by a ritual of worship (*pūjā*) dedicated to Gaṇapati and conducted by the temple priest who sits at the center of the stage. At the *pūjā*'s conclusion, the *Nambyār* on the stage is joined by a *Naṅgyār*[27] who sings and plays the cymbals while the ensemble begins playing a composition called *gōṣṭhi*, "audience," that includes drumming and songs (*akkitta*s) invoking gods. Once *gōṣṭhi* has been completed, the *Nambyār* leaves his seat, and, standing in front of the oil lamp, recites a benedictory verse while offering it water and flowers. This offering, called *araṅgu taḷi* (meaning "sprinkling the stage"), consecrates the stage and marks the end of the first part of the rituals (Figure 2).

The drummer returns to his seat and is joined by a second *miḻāvu* player and a player of hourglass drums such as *idakkya* or *timilā*.[28] One of the musicians blows a conch three times while two other members of the troupe enter the stage and spread a curtain between the performers and the audience. The ensemble starts playing and the *sūtradhāra* enters the stage to perform specific dance steps called *maṛaiyl kriyā*, the rituals "behind the curtain." Once these have been completed, the *sūtradhāra* turns toward the audience and the curtain is removed. He performs five steps (*pañcapada vinyāsa*; see Figure 14 below), salutes the stage while offering flowers, bows to it, and then performs a *pūjā* to the stage by means of hand gestures. He then stands and describes, using gestures, the happiness he was feeling that morning while going to the temple stage after having done all his rituals. The last section

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26. The following description of the *puṛappāṭu* is based on fieldwork conducted from October 2017 to September 2018 and information provided by Rajagopalan (2000), Nambyār (2005), Śliwczyńska (2007), and Naṅgyār (2010).
27. *Naṅgyār*s are the wives of the *Nambyār*s; they belong to the same community.
28. *Idakkya* and *timilā* are both hourglass drums. The *idakkya* is a tension drum; the skin of one of its heads is beaten with a curved stick held in one hand while the other hand, holding the instrument from its waist, moves it up and down in order to change pitch. The *timilā* is played by hands striking only one skin.

Figure 2. Kalamandalam Rahul offering flowers to the lamp.

of the *puṟappāṭu* is the *nitya kriyā*, which includes a sequence of ritual dance steps, songs (*akkitta*s), and dances invoking all living and non-living beings of the Three Worlds—Earth, Atmosphere, and Heaven—on the stage. The *sūtradhāra* ends the performance by offering salutation to the stage.

Since presently *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* is mostly performed in auditoriums and theaters, the ritual introduction is shortened to its most essential parts. It generally includes only the lighting of the three wicks of the lamp, the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*, the first part of the *maṟaiyl kriyā*, and the *pañcapada vinyāsa*.

I will now analyze the most important and meaningful ritual compositions played by the *Nambyār*s on the *miḻāvu*, highlighting the major compositional methods and features. Then, on the basis of the information gained from the musical analysis and from the field, I will suggest a symbolic interpretation of the entire *puṟappāṭu*.

MIḺĀVOCCAPPEṬUTTAL

The *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* is the first composition that a *Nambyār* plays at the beginning of every performance of *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* after rubbing the drum-skin and offering his respect (*abhivādyam*) to Gaṇapati, Sarasvatī, Dakṣiṇamūrti, Nandikeśvara, his guru, and the *miḻāvu*.[29] It is quite difficult to ascertain when the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* was composed, but musicians and

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29. The drummer salutes the drum by touching the drum-skin and then his earlobes three times.

scholars claim that it might be centuries old.[30] Indeed, its ritual function and the need for precise and rigorous execution might have guaranteed its transmission over generations and safeguarded it from significant changes. The hidden logic of the structure and sophisticated philosophical approach seem to suggest as much.

One of the most striking aspects of this composition, from a strictly musical point of view, is that has been traditionally transmitted without reference to any precise rhythmic cycle (*tāla*). It is a composition based on beats (*mātrā*s); it does not precisely fit any *tāla*. According to Kaladharan (2007), P. K. Narayanan Nambyār recently converted it into *ēka tāla* (Figure 3), and P. K. Narayanan Nambyār (2005) himself writes that the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* has to be played in *ēka tāla*, although the notation he provides in the same book appears as a sequence of a few lines of syllables punctuated by commas and not framed by any *tāla*. Isvaranunni (2010) notates it as a sequence of phrases listed in different lines, corresponding to the actual execution, but does not provide any information about *tāla*. In fact, presently, the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* is interpreted according to players' taste and performers' needs, and it is not set into a precise rhythmic frame. As various drummers told me, if the *sūtradhāra*, or the actor/actress performing the *puṟappāṭu*, is not fully ready but the beginning of the performance cannot be delayed the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* will be played very slowly. By contrast, if little time has been allotted for the performance, it may be played at a fast speed. Furthermore, in carefully listening to several examples, while the overall composition was played similarly by all *miḻāvu* players, there was not a perfect correspondence in the strokes.[31] For example, where someone plays a *taṁ* someone else plays a *tuṁ* at the same point in the piece.

I have transcribed in staff notation a version based on the executions by P. K. Narayanan Nambyār, Margi Saji Kumar, and Kalamandalam Narayanan Nambyār, and it almost always matches with the *tāla* known as *ēka tāla*, which is a cycle of four beats.[32] However, although compositions are said to be based on specific *tāla*s, their renditions do not mirror the information and even the basic background pulse is not steady since the tempo of some sections occasionally increases or decreases in speed. I think that the need to conceptualize the

X	2	3	4
♩	𝄾	𝄾	𝄾

Figure 3. *Ēka tāla.* In this and the following notations of the structure of rhythmic cycles (*tāla*s), numbers indicate counts—hence silence—while Xs indicate claps.

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30. This was the opinion conveyed to me by P. K. Narayanan Nambyār, Isvaranunni, and K. K. Gopalakrishnan.
31. During fieldwork conducted from October 2017 to September 2018, I have attended several performances of *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* and recorded around twenty versions of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* played by different drummers.
32. P. K. Narayanan Nambyār plays the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* in the documentaries of A. Gopalakrishnan (2001), Prathap (2001), and Subhash (1997). I recorded Margi Saji Kumar's performance at Margi, Trivandrum, on the November 28, 2017. Kalamandalam Narayanan Nambyār's rendition of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* was recorded by Farley Richmond and uploaded in his YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHHlbNAfkp0.

miḷāvoccappeṭuttal in a precise *tāla* is the result of a rationalization of the repertoire carried out by P. K. Narayanan Nambyār in the 1970s, during his years of teaching at the Kalamandalam. Indeed, the entire ritual section is not framed by precise metrical rules. The following analysis will reveal the main compositional methods adopted in this drumming tradition and the images hidden in the rhythms played on the drum.

The *miḷāvoccappeṭuttal* is a complex composition with a very rich structure based on numerical and geometrical patterns. The number two is the major structural element of this piece, which is divided in two main sections by a short break marked by the second salutation of the *miḷāvu* (*abhivādyam*). The first section (Audio 1) is in turn divided in two halves. The first half (Example 1 and Example 2a) is played twice in its entirety, at first only with the right hand (see Figure 4a and listen to Audio 1, cue point 0:00–0:27) and then only with the left hand (see Figure 4b and listen to Audio 1, cue point 0:28–0:49). This is a rare occasion in which only one hand plays at a time; they are normally played together, most often in sequences based on a regular alternation between the two (Figure 4c). The three *tuṁ* (Example 1a, sequence in square brackets) are almost always replaced by a short phrase composed by a sequence of *taṁ* and *tuṁ* repeated a number of times at increasing speed and a series of *taṁ* (Example 1b and Audio 1, sequence in square brackets).[33] The second half of the first part starts with three short phrases played twice (Example 2b and Audio 1, cue point 0:49–1:12), followed by a long phrase consisting of two parts that almost mirror each other (Example 2c and Audio 1, cue point 1:13–

Audio 1. The first section of the *miḷāvoccappeṭuttal*. Performed by Margi Saji Kumar at Margi Theatre Trivandrum in February 2018. Recorded by the author.

Example 1. The first phrase of the first section of the *miḷāvoccappeṭuttal*, corresponding to Example 2a.

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33. The version with the three *tuṁ*s is played by Kalamandalam Narayanan Nambyār in the video mentioned in footnote 32.

(abhivādyaṁ)

Right hand	Left hand

a. nṛttuṁ, nṛttuṁ, nṛttuṁ   **nṛttuṁ, nṛttuṁ, nṛttuṁ**
        tuṁ tuṁ tuṁ   **tuṁ tuṁ tuṁ**
            taduṁ   **taduṁ**
            tata   **tata**

b.   ti hyākkiṁ ta ta
        ti hyākkiṁ ta ta
        ti hyārkkittikkiṁ ta ta
        ti hyārkkittikkiṁ ta ta
        ti taṟahiṁ ta ta
        ti taṟahiṁ ta ta

c.   ti taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ
        tatattata ta tta tta tta
        ttata tatta tatta ttata
        ta taṟaha taṟahiṁ

d.   taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ
        taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ

e.   tanduṁ tata
        hyākkiṁ tata

(abhivādyaṁ)

Example 2. The first section of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*, corresponding to Audio 1.
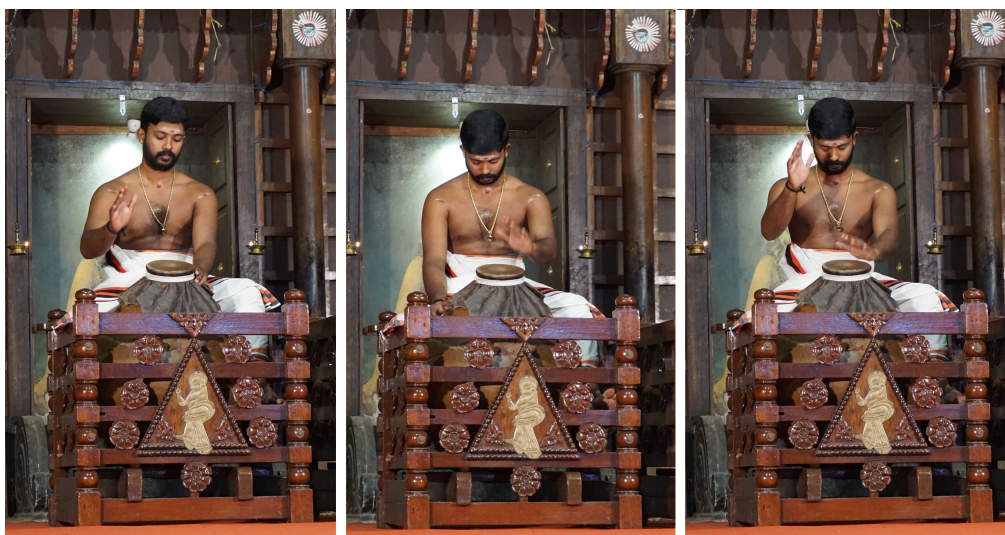

Figure 4. Margi Saji Kumar playing the first phrase of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* (see also Examples 1 and 2).

1:21), and again by a short phrase repeated twice (Example 2d and Audio 1, cue point 1:21–1:24).
The last two short phrases (Example 2e and Audio 1, cue point 1:25–1:28) are almost identical:
although the drum syllables *tanduṁ* and *hyākkiṁ,* which close the section, are different, they

correspond to the same strokes. Interestingly, this first section includes all the drum syllables that will be used in the subsequent parts of the composition.

At this moment the *Nambyār* takes a short rest to salute the drum (*abhivādyam*) for the third time and then starts playing again. The second section of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* may be divided into three different parts. The first part (Audio 2, Example 3) is repeated twice. The drum syllables *hyākkiṁ* that mark the closing of the first section introduce the second section of the piece; they are developed in this part and do not appear again in this piece, while the drum syllables *taṇdaṁ*—which are played just five times here—and *taṟahiṁ* are the building blocks of the next part of the composition. As shown in Example 3, the short phrases marked in bold at the core of this part are variations of the drum syllables *hyākkiṁ* and have been composed in decreasing length in order to create a downward pointing triangle.

The second part of the second and longest section (Audio 3, Example 4) is also based on the number 2 but has a more complex structure. This part may be divided in two halves. The first one, shown in Example 4, is composed of five units including four short phrases, where the first (A) and the third (A) are identical and the fourth (B1) is just a simple variation of the second one (B). The five units are based on the same patterns of drum syllables but have been composed in decreasing length by removing one drum motif (*taṇdaṁ* and *taṟaha*) in each of the four parts. Thus, the first long phrase includes five *taṇdaṁ*s and five *taṟaha*s in each of its four parts, the second includes four *taṇdaṁ*s and four *taṟaha*s, the third includes three *taṇdaṁ*s and three *taṟaha*s, the fourth includes two *taṇdaṁ*s and two *taṟaha*s, and the fifth includes one *taṇdaṁ* and one *taṟaha* (Example 4). The second half of this part is the precise reproduction of the four different variations of phrase B included in the first half: B(4) B1(4), B(3) B1(3), B (2) B1(2), B(1) B1(1). Example 5 illustrates this reproduction by placing side-by-side the variations with series of four *taṟaha*s.

[Audio 2.](#) The first part of the second section of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*. Performed by Margi Saji Kumar at Margi Theatre Trivandrum in February 2018. Recorded by the author.

```
                              hyākkiṁ
          taṇdaṁ taṇdaṁ taṇdaṁ taṇdaṁ taṇdaṁ
                               trēṁ
                        titti hyākkitikki
                      titti hyākki tikitiki
                          ti hyākkiti
                           ti hyākki
                         ta kkitinta
                            kitiki                    x 2
                             trēṁ
                      taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ
```

Example 3. The first part of the second section of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*, corresponding to Audio 2.

1	A	(5)	taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ tantaṁ trēṁ
	B	(5)	ta taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha ta taṟaha
	A	(5)	**taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ**
	B1	(5)	**taṇa taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha taṇa taṟaha**
2	A	(4)	taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
	B	(4)	ta taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha
	A	(4)	**taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ**
	B1	(4)	**taṇa taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha**
3	A	(3)	taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
	B	(3)	ta taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha
	A	(3)	**taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ**
	B1	(3)	**taṇa taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha**
4	A	(2)	taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
	B	(2)	ta taṟaha taṟaha
	A	(2)	**taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ**
	B1	(2)	**taṇa taṟaha taṟaha**
5	A	(1)	taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
	B	(1)	ta taṟaha
	A	(1)	**taṇḍaṁ trēṁ**
	B1	(1)	**taṇa taṟaha**
			taṇḍaṁ
			trēṁ

Example 4. The second part of the second section of the *miḷāvoccappeṭuttal*, corresponding to Audio 3. Phrases in bold help visualize that each one of the five sections is composed using two almost identical phrases.

a.

A	(4)	taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
B	(4)	ta taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha
A	(4)	**taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ**
B1	(4)	**taṇa taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha**

b.

B	(4)	ta taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha
B1	(4)	**taṇa taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha taṟaha**

Example 5. A comparison of the second unit of the first part of the second section (a.) and the first unit of the second part of the second section (b.) of the *miḷāvoccappeṭuttal*.

Thus, the two halves of this part are based on the same structure, which visually produces two downward pointing triangles. While the first half (Example 4) is built on modules of four parts (2+2) on the sequence of patterns 5x4, 4x4, 3x4, 2x4, 1x4, the second half is built on modules of two parts on the sequence 4x2, 3x2, 2x2, 1x2. The structure of this part of the *miḷāvoccappeṭuttal* may be clearly visualized by arranging the notation as follows (Example 6, Audio 3).

```
        A  (5)    taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  tantaṁ  trēṁ
        B  (5)       ta  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha  ta  taṟaha
        A  (5)    taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  trēṁ
        B1 (5)     taṇa  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṇa  taṟaha
        A  (4)      taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  trēṁ
        B  (4)         ta  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha
        A  (4)      taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  trēṁ
        B1 (4)       taṇa  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha
        A  (3)       taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  trēṁ
  a.    B  (3)          ta  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha
        A  (3)       taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  trēṁ
        B1 (3)        taṇa  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha
        A  (2)        taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  trēṁ
        B  (2)           ta  taṟaha  taṟaha
        A  (2)        taṇḍaṁ  taṇḍaṁ  trēṁ
        B1 (2)         taṇa  taṟaha  taṟaha
        A  (1)         taṇḍaṁ  trēṁ
        B  (1)            ta  taṟaha
        A  (1)         taṇḍaṁ  trēṁ
        B1 (1)          taṇa  taṟaha
                          taṇḍaṁ
                           trēṁ


        B  (4)       ta  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha
        B1 (4)      taṇa  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha
        B  (3)         ta  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha
  b.    B1 (3)        taṇa  taṟaha  taṟaha  taṟaha
        B  (2)           ta  taṟaha  taṟaha
        B1 (2)          taṇa  taṟaha  taṟaha
        B  (1)             ta  taṟaha
        B1 (1)            taṇa  taṟaha
                          taṇa  kkiṭi
                            kkiṭinta
  c.                         kiṭiki
                             trēṁ
```

Example 6. The second part of the second section of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*, corresponding to Audio 3.

Although the most evident aspect of this section of the piece is its being based on the progressive reduction of rhythmic units that may be visualized as triangles, the presence of the number two as structural feature is still prominent. Indeed, each of the five units of the first part is composed using two phrases, A-B and A-B1. Even the four units in the second part include two phrases, B and B1. Furthermore, the emphasis in both the parts of this section is put on the two main sounds of the drum, the high pitched *taṁ* and the low pitched *tuṁ*, that create the effect of a strong oscillation between two opposite poles.

In order to explain this feature, it has to be noted that the syllables denoting the different drum syllables (*vāyattāri*) do not always correspond exactly to precise strokes played on the drum and are confusing in some cases. The drum syllables *taṇ daṁ* provide a typical instance of such ambiguity. Transcription in staff notation helps us understand what really lies behind the mnemonics for these phrases and the strokes that are actually played (Example 7a). Indeed, while the notation through drum syllables helps to analyze and visualize the structure of the pieces, staff notation allows us to properly understand and visualize the precise strokes represented by different drum syllables and their duration. In this case, the drum syllables *taṇ*

daṁ do not correspond to two different strokes as they suggest, but denote the same strokes played twice in succession; in part A5 of Example 7a, the syllables *taṇ daṁ* are played using the strokes *taṁ taṁ* in alternation with the strokes *tuṁ tuṁ*. In a similar way, the last stroke *ha* of the drum syllables *taṟaha* is alternatively played as *taṁ* in B and as *tuṁ* in B1 (Example 7b).[34] A short phrase, which I marked as part c in Example 6, closes the second section. Although the polarity established by creating a symmetry between low and high pitch strokes is extremely important in the second section of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*, it is a feature of the entire piece that manifests through a careful listening and analysis of the staff notation.

Example 7a. The first unit of Example 6a, from the second section of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*. The high-pitched sound *taṁ* and the low pitched *tuṁ* are the two main sounds produced by the *miḻāvu*. However, these sounds are associated with different syllables in order to create a number of patterns.

Example 7b. The first unit of Example 6b, from the second section of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*.

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34. This shows once more that even small units such as *taṇ daṁ, taṇ daṁ* are based on the number two since they include two repetitions of the same strokes. The structural importance of the double repetition in the sonic aspect of *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* was emphasized also by Kalamandalam Sajith (interview, July 6, 2019) who pointed out that, although this procedure is no longer followed, according to tradition, even the recitation of the *ślōka*s by actors should be repeated twice.

The final cadence of the composition (Audio 4, Example 8), may also be divided in two halves. The first part is composed by a phrase repeated twice and sandwiched between the drum syllables *kitikitikitikiti* and *dhikatakataka* (Example 8a). Although denoted by different syllables, the strokes actually played are the same and correspond to a series of *taṁ taṁ* and *tuṁ tuṁ* (Example 9). Furthermore, they again create triangles, since the pattern are played at

```
                              ki ti
                              trēṁ

                  ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti
                      ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti
                          ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti
                              ki ti ki ti ki ti
                                ki ti ki ti
                                  ki ti

                          tā tā tā ṭṭī trēṁ
                        ti ṭṭi ṭṭa ta tatati trēṁ
                        tā ṭṭā ṭṭā ṭṭī trēṁ
                        ti ṭṭi ta ta tatati trēṁ

                  dhi ka ta ka ta ka ta ka ta ka ta ka
                      ta ka ta ka ta ka ta ka ta ka
                          ta ka ta ka ta ka
                              ta ka ta ka
                                ta ka
                                  ta

a.
```

```
                          rtuṁ trēṁ
                          rtuṁ trēṁ
                      taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ
                          nrṭṭuṁ
                              ki
                            trēṁ
                            ki ti
                            trēṁ
b.
```

Example 8. The third section of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*, corresponding to Audio 4.

Example 9. Drum syllables from the third section of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*, corresponding to part of Example 8a.

increasing levels of speed (Example 8a). The closing part works as a kind of fading out based on the most important drum syllables of the piece (Example 8b), ending on *trēṁ*. The composition ends and the *Nambyār* salutes the drum (*abhivādyam*) for the fourth time.

Gōṣṭhi

While the *miḷāvoccappeṭuttal* is a composition for solo *miḷāvu*, *gōṣṭhi* requires the presence of a *Naṅgyār* who plays the cymbals (*ilattāḷam*) and sings (Figure 5). She generally keeps the rhythmic cycle (*tāla*) but sometimes plays the cymbals in unison with the drum. According to P. K. Narayanan Nambyār (2005), *gōṣṭhi* is set in the *tāla* known as *caturaśra tripuṭa tāla*, which is the squared (*caturaśra*) version of *tripuṭa tāla* (Figure 6). *Gōṣṭhi* is a sequence much longer than the *miḷāvoccappeṭuttal*, and it includes *akkittas*, which are songs invoking gods sung exclusively during the *puṟappāṭu*. *Akkitta*s are the only instances of songs in the context of *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ*. The *Cākyār*s' recitation has been referred as singing because the various intonations of the text

Figure 5. Kalamandalam Nila (voice, *ilattāḷam*) and Kalamandalam Rahul (*miḷāvu*) performing *gōṣṭhi* at Thekke Madom, Thrissur.

X	2	X	X
♩	𝄽	♩	♩

Figure 6. *Caturaśra tripuṭa tāla.*

have been called *rāgas* and are associated with specific emotions. However, this peculiar technique of reciting the text is more akin to cantillation than to song. Indeed, some scholars have connected the *Cākyārs*' recitation with the ancient Sanskrit texts the Yajur Veda (Sajeev Cākyār, interview; S. Gopalakrishnan 2011, 104) or the Sāmaveda (Sowle 1982, 146); others have considered it as a form connected to both the Yajur Veda and the Sāmaveda (Rajagopalan 1994, 113).

Gōṣṭhi is composed of two main sections. The first section may be divided into two parts. The first is represented by a piece, called *vāyikkuka* (Audio 5, Example 10), which means "playing," composed according to the same principles that govern the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*: the symmetrical relationship between the drum syllables *taṁ* and *tuṁ*, and the double repetition of phrases.

The following part includes a series of short and simple pieces for solo drum organized in three subsections that are themselves linked by two of the short pieces (Figure 7). In the first subsection, two pieces, A and B, are repeated twice. Then A is played once more and linked to C, a short piece that works as bridge to the second subsection. This is composed of two new pieces, D and E, repeated four times each. Then a new short item, F, leads to the third subsection: a long piece (G) including two parts and repeated four times.[35]

Example 10. *Vāyikkuka*, corresponding to Audio 5.

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35. The pieces included in this section are very similar to some included in the *maṟayil kriyā* played to accompany the dance steps of the *Cākyār*. Both are quite regular and geometric.
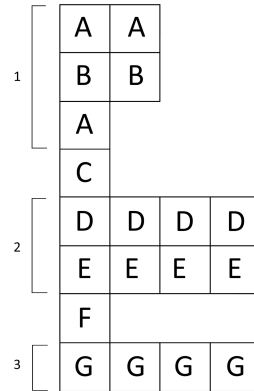
Figure 7. The structure of *gōṣṭhi*.

Example 11. The last phrase of the first part of the *puṟappāṭu*.

The second section is a sequence of *akkitta*s accompanied by the *miḻāvu* and punctuated by short interludes of solo drumming. Interestingly, while the *akkitta*s are sung gently and have a soft mood, the drummer punctuates loudly and with an energetic approach. Once *gōṣṭhi* has been performed the *Nambyār* recites the benedictory verse (*nāndī śloka*) in front of the lamp, offers flowers and water (*araṅgu taḷi*), and comes back to the *miḻāvu* to play a short phrase (Example 11) marking the end of the first part of the *puṟappāṭu*.

MAṞAYIL KRIYĀ

Vāyikkuka, the composition that starts *gōṣṭhi*, is also played to introduce the *maṟayil kriyā* (Figure 8). Soon after, two members of the troupe enter the stage, raise the curtain, and a musician blows the conch three times. The actor enters the stage from the left door, taking his place in front of the *miḻāvu* players (see Figure 13 below), who play *abhivādyam* (Audio 6, Example 12), the first piece of the *maṟayil kriyā*. This, the salutation that the *Cākyār* offers to the *miḻāvu*, begins in *tripuṭa tāla*[36] (Figure 9) and then moves to *caturaśra tripuṭa tāla*.

This section includes short compositions based on similar structural patterns, in which the strokes of the drum guide and correspond to the movements of the actor's eyes, hands, and feet. Besides *abhivādyam*, it comprises five parts including short drumming pieces and choreographies. The structure of the sequence may be synthesized as in Figure 10. B and A are

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36. It may be noted that the internal division of the first six bars in Example 12 is 2+2+3, which does not correspond to the 3+2+2 structure of *tripuṭa tāla* on which they are said to be set by both musicians and actors.

Figure 8. Members of Nepathya group hold the curtain while the *Cākyār* performs the *Maṟayil kriyā*.

Audio 6. *Abhivādyam*. Performed by Margi Saji Kumar and Margi Mahesh at Margi Theatre Trivandrum in April 2018. Recorded by the author.

Example 12. *Abhivādyam*, corresponding to Audio 6.

Figure 9. *Tripuṭa tāla* (7 beats) and *caturaśra tripuṭa tāla* (4 beats).

Figure 10. The sequence of short pieces in *maṟayil kriya*.

```
A5    trēṁ-kiti kiṭṭi taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ
B5    trēṁ-kiti kiṭṭi taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ
A4      trēṁ-kiti kiṭṭi taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ
B4      trēṁ-kiti kiṭṭi taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ
A3       trēṁ-kiti kiṭṭi taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ
B3       trēṁ-kiti kiṭṭi taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ
A2        trēṁ-kiti kiṭṭi taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ
B2        trēṁ-kiti kiṭṭi taṟahiṁ taṟahiṁ
A1         trēṁ-kiti kiṭṭi taṟahiṁ
B1         trēṁ-kiti kiṭṭi taṟahiṁ
              taṇa kkiti kkitinta
                  kitiki
                  trēṁ
```

Example 13. Section E of the *maṟayil kriya*.

periodically repeated like a refrain; C and D are played four times consecutively; A1 (a variation of A), E, and F, which closes the *kriyā*, are each played once.

E (Example 13) is the only piece in the *maṟayil kriyā* with a complex structure similar to the one found in the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* (see Example 6 above). In this case the drum syllables of the two repetitions of each phrase also alternate between the stroke of *taṁ* and *tuṁ* respectively. Even the *Cākyār* adds emphasis to this symmetry by stamping his right heel in time with each *taṟahiṁ* repetition in A phrases and his left heel with each *taṟahiṁ* repetition in B phrases.

Nitya kriyā

The *nitya kriyā*, a daily ritual, is a long sequence of drumming pieces and choreographed movements of the *Cākyār* and songs (*akkittas*). Compositions such as *ceriyokku*, *valiyokku*, and *kuṇkuṇam* are based on the same rules and ideas already discussed, and include phrases from *gōṣṭhi* and *maṟayil kriyā*. Others like *keśādipādam*, *dikpāla vandanam*, and *nṛttam*, are basically skeletal renditions of the *tāla*, timekeeping patterns framed by a short intro and a final phrase. The sequence proceeds from compositions organized in sections to *tāla*-based compositions in which the dance is based on geometrical patterns.

SONIC ARCHITECTURES

There are several ways to interpret a complex ritual performance such as the *puṟappāṭu*, which has incorporated and synthesized different elements throughout its secular history. I will look at it from the point of view of the *miḻāvu*, its repertoire and the ideas and symbols associated with it, considering the information provided by contemporary musicians of the *Nambyār* and *Mārār* communities. I will also consider the theories regarding the sonic origin of the universe described in Tantric texts and the symbolic meaning and the ideas associated with the mirror in folk rituals of Kerala and different schools of Tantra.

One of the earliest and most important texts of the Kerala Tantra tradition is the Prapañcasāra, "Essence of the evolution," an anonymous digest ascribed to Śaṅkarācārya, the founder of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy, and variably attributed between the ninth and the eleventh century CE (Goudriaan and Gupta 1981; Unni 2014). Two other important and authoritative texts are the Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati by Īśānaśivaguru (twelfth century), and the already mentioned Tantrasamuccaya by Narayana (Unni 2014; Freeman 2016; Flood 1996). These texts, in particular the last two, mention music and musical instruments that have to be played in rituals (Unni 2006, 2014; Prajith 2008), but they do not provide details about compositions and associated rhythmic cycles. In fact, the tradition of temple ritual music in Kerala is associated with *Mārār* community, who maintained this oral tradition as closely guarded secret.

My research in the temples of Kerala and interviews with *Mārār* musicians and *tantri*s has helped me understand the importance of Tantric theories for the composition of music and the general shaping of rituals. Since *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* has been associated with temples for centuries and temple communities have been influenced reciprocally, it is likely that *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* was influenced by Tantra. Thus, it was not a surprise to me when transcriptions started revealing *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* and *gōṣṭhi* as sonic and visual representations of Tantric theories, and this finding suggested to me that the entire *puṟappāṭu* could be read as enactment of various steps of the manifestation of the universe from a Tantric perspective.[37]

According to Tantra, cosmic manifestation (*sṛṣṭi*) takes place in stages that proceed from the subtlest energy to densest matter. It is thought to be produced by the movement of sound energy that expands and solidifies generating the multiplicity of life in the universe (Bansat-Boudon 2014; Khanna 1994). From primordial stillness the universe expands and evolves through several phases and attributes, and then reverts back to its initial state of stasis. The state of primordial stillness and non-manifestation is consciousness empty of any objective content; one without a second (non-dual) and without parts. This state is identified with

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37. The process I will outline is assumed as the basis of the ritual music played in temples of Kerala, but it does not rely exclusively on a specific indigenous text since Tantric texts from Kerala are mostly concerned with temple rituals (Unni 2006, 2014; Prajith 2008; Goodall and Isaacson 2011). The Tantrasamuccaya, for instance, describes the steps of the process of universal manifestation in a reverse order while giving instructions on the ritual called *tattva saṃhāram*, in which the priest visualizes the resorption of the universe into the golden egg (5:26–41, translated in Unni 2014, 334–44).

Paramaśiva, the Supreme Lord, the transcendent Śiva, or with Śiva inseparably united with Śakti, in a state of non-differentiation (Padoux 1990; Woodroffe 1994, 1996; Khanna 1994). When Śiva reflects in Śakti as a mirror, this generates duality and activates the movement of sound energy toward the manifestation. *Nāda* is the first ideating movement rising from the primordial state of mere potency. From *nāda* emerges *bindu*, "the drop," which is energy collected within a single point.[38] It represents the first stage of condensation of the primordial sound vibration that is also luminous. The seed (*bīja*) will emit the universe. It appears as "a mass formed by the union of Śiva and Śakti" (Padoux 1990, 106; Woodroffe 1961). *Bindu* divides into three, *bindu*, *bīja*, and *nāda*, that are Śiva and Śakti and their union, producing the triangle called *kāmakalā*. From this energetic and sonic triad evolve numerous other triads and the entire universe (Padoux 1990; Woodroffe 1994, 1996; Khanna 1994).

The flashing forth of the *bindu* generates *nādabrahman*, a sound (*rava*) that is the source of the five *mahābhūtas*, or "gross elements"—ether, air, fire, water, and earth—and the lower cosmic categories of the manifested universe[39] that is conceived as structured in thirty-six cosmic principles (*tattvas*) unfolding from the primordial unity of Paramaśiva (Figure 11). These cosmic principles are divided into two paths: the pure *tattva*s and the impure *tattva*s. The pure path (Śiva *tattvas*) consists of Śiva in union with Śakti and their energies of will (*sadāśiva*), knowledge (*iśvara*), and action (*śuddhavidyā*). The impure path consists of Māyā Śakti, the five types of limitation (*kañcuka*s) of the powers of Śiva/Śakti, the Male principle (*purūṣa*) and the Female Principle (*prakṛti*), consisting of three qualities (*guṇa*s): *sattva, rajas, tamas*. Then, the intellect (*buddhi*), the ego-sense (*ahaṃkāra*), the mind (*manas*), and the gross categories of nature grouped in clusters of five, including five sense organs (*jñānendriya*s), five action organs (*karmendriya*s), five subtle elements (*tanmātra*s), and five gross elements (*mahābhūta*s).

Thus, in Tantric cosmologies, *nāda* is conceived as the primordial sound that generates the universe in its subtle and gross states, as well as the life force that keeps it alive. In the next section I will argue how the *puṟappāṭu* re-enacts such sonic cosmology through sound and performance.

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38. "From the glorious Lord who is being, consciousness and blissful by nature and who is inseparably associated with *Śakti*, *Śakti* emerged. From which *nāda*, the primal sound was born. From *nāda* the emergence of *bindu* occurred" (Śāradā Tilaka I:7, quoted in Bäumer 2003, 9). The Śāradā Tilaka, "The forehead ornament of Sarasvatī," by Lakṣmaṇadeśika (eleventh century) is considered the second basic digest after the aforementioned Prapañcasāra (Goudriaan and Gupta 1981, 198, 135).

39. "From the Red-Bindu about to create arose sound (*rava*) which is the *Nādabrahman* sprout. From that (Sound) came Ether, Air, Fire, Water, Earth and the Letters of the alphabet" (Kāmakalā Vilāsa 9, translated in Woodroffe 1961, 22). The Prapañcasāra and the Śāradā Tilaka provide a similar description (Padoux 1990; Woodroffe 1994; Goudriaan and Gupta 1981), and the section of the Īśānagurudeva-paddhati devoted to *mantra*s says that they are produced by Śakti, becoming *bindu*, *nāda*, and *rava*. Furthermore, it speaks of the four stages of sound given in the reverse order: *Vaikharī, Madhyamā, Paśyantī,* and *Suksmā* (Unni 2006; Prajith 2008).
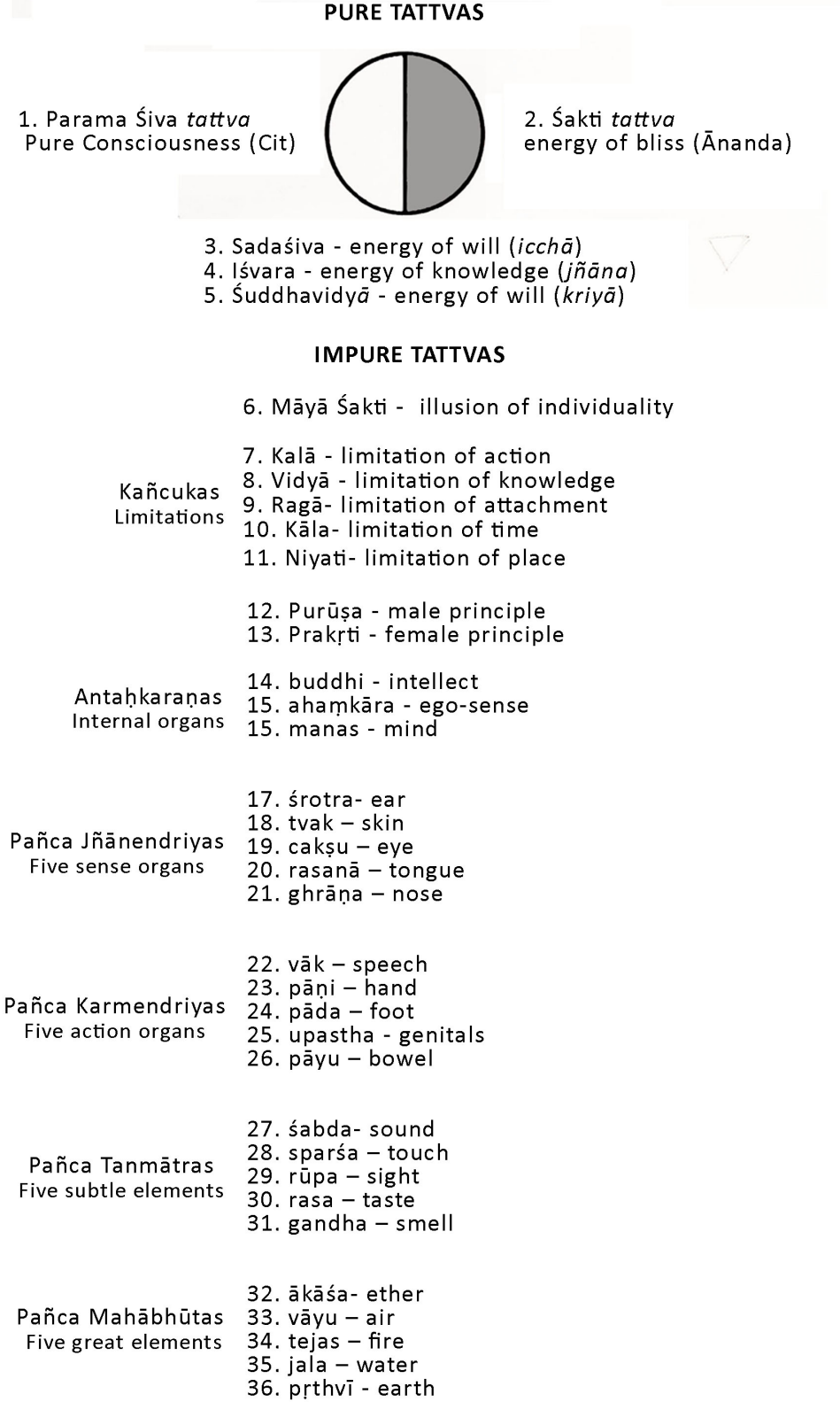
PURE TATTVAS

1. Parama Śiva *tattva*
Pure Consciousness (Cit)

2. Śakti *tattva*
energy of bliss (Ānanda)

3. Sadaśiva - energy of will (*icchā*)
4. Iśvara - energy of knowledge (*jñāna*)
5. Śuddhavidyā - energy of will (*kriyā*)

IMPURE TATTVAS

6. Māyā Śakti - illusion of individuality

Kañcukas
Limitations
7. Kalā - limitation of action
8. Vidyā - limitation of knowledge
9. Ragā- limitation of attachment
10. Kāla- limitation of time
11. Niyati- limitation of place

12. Purūṣa - male principle
13. Prakṛti - female principle

Antaḥkaraṇas
Internal organs
14. buddhi - intellect
15. ahaṃkāra - ego-sense
15. manas - mind

Pañca Jñānendriyas
Five sense organs
17. śrotra- ear
18. tvak – skin
19. cakṣu – eye
20. rasanā – tongue
21. ghrāṇa – nose

Pañca Karmendriyas
Five action organs
22. vāk – speech
23. pāṇi – hand
24. pāda – foot
25. upastha - genitals
26. pāyu – bowel

Pañca Tanmātras
Five subtle elements
27. śabda- sound
28. sparśa – touch
29. rūpa – sight
30. rasa – taste
31. gandha – smell

Pañca Mahābhūtas
Five great elements
32. ākāśa- ether
33. vāyu – air
34. tejas – fire
35. jala – water
36. pṛthvī - earth

Figure 11. The thirty-six *tattva*s.

TRIANGLES AND TRIADS

According to P. K. Narayanan Nambyār and Isvaraunni, the *miḷāvu* is constantly engaged in worshipping *nādabrahman*. In other words, the *miḷāvu* is symbolically identified with *nādabrahman*, the sound that produces the universe. In fact, the *miḷāvu* is shaped like a sphere, an egg, or a seed (*bīja*), and it is conceived as a self-generated drum.[40] My analysis of the musical repertoire of the *puṟappāṭu* confirms all such associations and suggests that the *miḷāvu* is emblematic of *bindu*, the first source and matrix of the universe, the self-born world-seed (Khanna 1994, 31) or golden egg (Unni 2014, 344). Indeed, I maintain that the *miḷāvu* represents *bindu* and that the drummer's two hands represent Śiva and Śakti, the primordial cosmic energy. As demonstrated above, the *miḷāvoccappeṭuttal* begins with the playing of the two hands separately.[41] This is the first statement of polarity of forces by gestures and by sounds (see Figures 4a and 4b above). However, the two opposites do not conflict, but rather reflect each other, since they play exactly the same phrase.[42] Immediately after the execution of this phrase the hands start playing together (Figure 4c), as if to represent and re-enact the union of Śiva and Śakti, creating the first triad and the *kāmakalā* triangle. When the hands join, the polarity becomes unity, harmonious relationship. The action of the two forces starts creating new polarities that are manifested in the composition as double repetitions of parts of it and emphasized by the continuous oscillation between the high-pitched *taṁ* and the low pitched *tuṁ* (see Examples 7 and 8 above). What is particularly interesting to note is that, as has been seen while analyzing the piece, the way these repetitions are presented is always different and, significantly, grows in size and complexity. At first the repetition is applied to short phrases (Example 2), then to a section of the composition (Example 3), and then it evolves in complex patterns (Examples 4 and 6).

These variations may also be seen as different manifestations of the interactions of polarities (Śiva and Śakti) of forces at different levels. They are a series of couples, evolving in different ways and giving birth to others in a process of continuous growth. The expansion reaches its apex at the middle of the piece and continues as shown by the triangles (Examples 6 and 9) created until the last phrase that marks the conclusion with a fading out sequence of strokes. Thus, the entire composition represents the first movements toward the manifestation of the universe through sounds and actions.

I have studied similar forms in music in previous research, arguing that drums in India have been strongly associated with various kinds of geometrical and literary images (Pacciolla 2020a). This capacity for drums to create geometric images and its methodology has been treated in musical treatises and described under the category of the *yati*. Thus, for instance,

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40. The *miḷāvu* is also the source and soul of the drama, since its sound accompanies all the movement of the actors, bodily as well as emotional.

41. The action of the hands (*nyāsa*) in Tantric ritual is of the highest importance since, through the touch of the hands empowered with *mantra*s, the practitioner ritually creates his or her new body capable of hosting the divine energy.

42. This phrase is quite interesting since it is based on the triple repetition of few drum syllables (Figure 4a) that preview the triads and triangles that will be generated in the following parts of the composition.

downward-pointing triangles such as those visible in my notation of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* may be described as *gopucchā* (cow tail) *yati*, while upward-pointing triangles may be described as *srotogatā* (like the flow of a stream) *yati*. However, this terminology, which is adopted in Karṇāṭak music and North Indian genres such as *dhrupad*, is not part of the vocabulary of Kerala drumming in general, and it has not been adopted in *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ*. Furthermore, as already mentioned, neither P. K. Narayanan Nambyār nor Isvaraunni notates compositions in a visual way.

When I interviewed P. K. Narayanan Nambyār, I had already noted that the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* was based on double repetitions and included passages in the shape of triangles, so I tried to learn something more about it from him, besides asking about the purpose and meaning of playing it at the beginning of the performance. He replied saying that the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* is a piece that gradually grows from quiet to very loud voice. Then, confirming the presence of triangles and excited by the fact that I had recognized them, he enthusiastically added new information comparing the shape of the composition first to the shape of the *miḻāvu* and then to a human body, identifying the *miḻāvu* itself as the torso of a man and the stand (*miḻāvana*) as his legs. Furthermore, quoting the fight between Devas and Asuras (gods and demons) after the first performance of *nāṭya* narrated in the first chapter of the Nāṭyaśāstra, he told me that the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* is a call to the Devas to come on the stage and protect it from any evil forces.[43]

The comparison between the human body and the *miḻāvu* is very helpful in understanding other important symbolic aspects hidden in this composition, as well as its meaning and scope. However, in order to unravel the implications of this information I have to explain what the scope is, according to Tantric priests (*tantri*s) and *Mārār* musicians, of creating triangles through sound and their symbolic meaning. It will also help to understand how geometric forms are symbolically meaningful and will clarify the previous interpretation.

Triangles are the most basic geometric forms used in Tantra. A downward pointing triangle (*trikoṇa*) symbolizes the female principle. It is the usual symbol of the *yoni*, the feminine sexual organ, which is also the place of birth.[44] The *trikoṇa* is a vulva and a womb since it gives birth to the manifestation, and since it produces the sonic unfolding of cosmogony it is also a mouth (Padoux 1990; Flood 1993, 80; White 2006, 275).[45] An upward

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43. As has already been said, according to *Kūtiyāṭṭaṃ* performers the *puṟappāṭu* is performed to invite the gods on the stage in order to protect it from evil forces (see also Naṅgyār 2010). P. K. Narayanan Nambyār provides a textual source for this belief.

44. "When the *bindu* becomes ready to evolve (*ucchūna*), it transforms and manifests as a triangle" (Kāmakalā Vilāsa 22, translated in Woodroffe 1961, 45).

45. Tantric texts clearly point out this association: "By [the term] 'trikona' is indicated [or hinted at] the aspect of place of birth, in other words of the 'mouth of the Yoginī (*yoginīvaktra*) of this [phoneme]. From this place is born the supreme Energy, as has been said: 'When She comes forth, curved, out of the triangular seat' and 'the triangle is called *bhaga* [vulva], secret *maṇḍala*, abiding in the sky, its angles being will, cognition, and action while its center evolves the *cincini* [sound]' (Jayaratha). For this reason (being it a vulva) 'in ritual practice also' he says later on, 'the place where the coming forth takes place is that of the highest bliss because of the discharge associated with it at the time of the bliss emission'" (Padoux 1990, 266).

pointing triangle symbolizes the male principle, fire, and evokes destruction and resorption (Khanna 1994, 32; White 2006, 273). In Kerala, triangles or similar figures like cones or pyramids are adopted to represent the dynamics of universal forces as well. Two main processes are at the core of temple rituals in Kerala: the invocation of gods and their energies in a certain place (*āvāhanam*) and the release of such energies (*saṃhāram*). The process of invoking a god, which entails the concentration of energy in a specific place, is symbolically represented as a downward pointing triangle, while the process of releasing energy is visualized as an upward pointing triangle. Almost all the ritual music played in Brahmanical temples of Kerala[46] is based on these principles and thus music is composed and performed in order to create sonic triangles.[47] Important rituals such as *marappāṇi*, which aims at invoking the *caitanya* (consciousness) of a deity in a precise spot or at releasing it (Omchery Bhalla 1990, 6–7; 2006, 86), create music by shaping it in this way,[48] and even music of less ritual importance such as the *thāyampaka* follows the same concept and methodology.[49] Thus the creation of triangles by means of sound aims at bringing on the earth specific divine energies and controlling them.[50] In a similar way, I maintain that the various sonic triangles generated by the *miḷāvoccappeṭuttal* (Figure 12) aim at invoking gods on the stage, and more specifically invite them to take a seat on the stage according to the *vāstudevatamaṇḍala*, the diagram establishing the proper place for the various gods, with Brahma at its center (Rajagopalan 2000, 13).[51]

The manifestation of the universe as time and space and the enlivenment of the stage are analogous processes since the stage symbolically represents space and gods symbolize the forces that make life possible. The relationship between triangles or triads, the manifestation of the universe, and gods is clearly expressed by the Śāradā Tilaka[52] (1.10.12):

> From the [lower] *bindu* comes Raudrī, from *nāda* Jyeṣṭhā, and from *bīja* Vāmā. From these [three divinized energies] come forth [three gods:] Rudra, Brahmā, and the Lord of Rāma (Viṣṇu). Their [respective] natures are [those of the three powers of] knowledge, will, and action: they are fire, moon, and sun. Through this division of the supreme *bindu* springs forth the unmanifest sound (*rava*) called *śabdabrahman* by those who are learned in all the Āgamas (Padoux 1990, 117–18).

46. My current research in the music of folk ritual performing arts of various communities such as Tiyyāṭiāṭṭam, Kaḷameḻuttu, Mudiyēṭṭu and Teyyāṭṭam show that this structural model is widespread in Kerala.

47. Similar procedures based on time span compression have been studied by Wegner (1992, 129) in relation with the invocations for Nāsaḥdyaḥ, the god of music and dance in Nepal, and in the context of Newar music as related with the various areas of a *maṇḍala* contracting towards its center (Wegner 2009). Widdess studies similar procedures in the context of ancient and medieval musical forms (2019) and in *dāphā* music of Nepal (2013, 258).

48. According to Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār, ritual compositions aim at concentrating energy in a single spot (*bindu*) and are shaped like an inverted cone (Interview, April 15, 2018).

49. As clearly stated by all the *Mārār*s I interviewed, all the temple forms listed under the category of *mēlam*s follow the same structural pattern. See note 9.

50. This is the principle behind *Kaḷameḻuttu* and numerous other ritual performances of Kerala in which drumming plays a crucial role. Usually, in such performances deities are invoked into a drawing (*kaḷam*) and/or into the body of an oracle and are appeased by means of various kinds of offerings.

51. The same interpretation is valid in *Kathakali* tradition, where "the stage represents the world that has come into being in space by the primal act of the Creator" (Sowle 1982, 228).

52. On the Śāradā Tilaka see note 38.

a.

nr
ttuṁ
nr
ttuṁ
nr
ttuṁ
tuṁ
tuṁ
tuṁ
taduṁ
tata

b.

nr
ttuṁ
nr
ttuṁ
nr
ttuṁ
tuṁ
tuṁ
tuṁ
taduṁ
tata

c.

ti
hyākkiṁ
ta ta
ti
hyārkkiṭṭikkiṁ
ta ta
ti
tarahiṁ
ta ta
ti
tarahiṁ tarahiṁ
tataṭṭata ta ṭṭa ṭṭa ṭṭa
ṭṭata taṭṭa taṭṭa ṭṭata
ta taraha tarahiṁ
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ
taduṁ
tata
hyākkiṁ
tata

hyākkiṁ
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ
taṇḍaṁ
trēṁ
titti
hyākkitikki
titti
hyākki tikitiki
ti
hyākkiti
ti
hyākki
takkitiṇṭa kitiki trēṁ
tarahiṁ tar…hiṁ
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇtaṁ trēṁ
ta taraha taraha taraha taraha ta taraha
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
taṇa taraha taraha taraha taraha taṇ taraha
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
ta taraha taraha taraha taraha
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
taṇa taraha taraha taraha taraha
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
ta taraha taraha taraha
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
taṇa taraha taraha taraha
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
ta taraha taraha
taṇḍaṁ taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
taṇa taraha taraha
taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
ta taraha
taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
taṇa taraha
taṇḍaṁ trēṁ
ta taraha taraha taraha taraha
taṇa taraha taraha taraha taraha
ta taraha taraha taraha
taṇa taraha taraha taraha
ta taraha taraha
taṇa taraha taraha
ta taraha
taṇa taraha
taṇa kkiti
kkitiṇṭa
kitiki
trēṁ

ki ti nta

kiṭikitikitikiti
ṭki ti nta

ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti
ki ti ki ti ki ti ki ti
ki ti ki ti ki ti
ki ti ki ti
ki ti

tā tā tā ttī trēṁ
ti tti tta ta tatati trēṁ
tā ttā ttā ttī trēṁ
ti tti ta ta tatati trēṁ

dhi ka ta ka ta ka ta ka ta ka
ta ka ta ka ta ka
ta ka ta ka
ta ka

rtuṁ
trēṁ
rtuṁ trēṁ
tarahiṁ tar…hiṁ
nrttuṁ
ki
trēṁ
ki ti
trēṁ

Figure 12. The *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* as representation of the first stages of manifestation of the universe.

Gōṣṭhi represents another important phase marked by the entrance of a *Naṅgyār* on the stage. The polarization expressed in the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* by the right and the left hand of the drummer performing alone on the stage is now made visible by the presence of a man and a woman. Interestingly, the *Naṅgyār* plays the cymbals (*ilattāḻam*), themselves a representation of duality, providing the rhythmic frame (*tāla*) for the drummer.

In my interpretation, *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* is a representation of the first stages of emanation of the cosmos from its fountainhead (*bindu*), the beginning of time and space and the invocation of gods on the stage, and *gōṣṭhi* reproduces the placement of order in the universe and the settlement of the gods on the stage. This is also shown by the drum compositions. Indeed, the simple and short pieces for solo *miḻāvu* chained in regular symmetrical repetitions establish ordered space and time, and they do so on the basis of the rhythm measured by the cymbals of the *Naṅgyār*s sitting on the stage and invoking gods with meaningful words. The ordering function of *gōṣṭhi* is highlighted by the fact that it also enacts the transition from the percussive sound of the *miḻāvu*, symbolizing the *śabdabrahman* spoken by the quoted verse Śāradā Tilaka,[53] to the words of the *akkitta*s songs. Interestingly, *akkitta*s include both lexical words and non-lexical syllables, such as *te*, *na*, and *dhi*, that punctuate the texts as a refrain and have a purely rhythmic function.[54] The consecration of the stage through *araṅgu taḻi* and *nāndī śloka* stands for the complete establishment of time and space and the readiness to proceed towards a further step.

Given this symbolic interpretation, I maintain that the first section of the *puṟappāṭu* is focused on the enlivenment of the stage. Further confirmation is provided by the analogy established by P. K. Narayanan Nambyār between the form of the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* and the shape of the *miḻāvu*. Indeed, by playing it the *Nambyār* invokes the presence of Nandikeśvara, the deity that resides in the drum and is the tutelary god of the stage and the theater itself. Such important association is explained by Rajagopalan, who writes that since Śiva as Naṭarāja is said to have danced on the back of his bull, the stage and the theater are considered to be Nandikeśvara (Rajagopalan 2000, 16).[55]

MIRRORINGS

Once time has been set in orderly motion, space has been properly settled in its subtle state, and the stage has been enlivened with the presence of all the gods in their places, the process of universal manifestation described above can proceed toward a further step. With the *maṟayil kriyā* we reach the stage when sound energy thickens, giving birth to dense matter

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53. Commenting on the quoted verse (1.10.12) of the Śāradā Tilaka, Woodroffe writes, "this causal 'sound' is the unmanifested (Avyaktātmā), undifferentiated (Akhaṇḍa) principle of Śabda (Nādamātra), composed of Nāda and Bindu (Nādabindumaya) devoid of all particularity such as letters and the like (Varṇādiviśeṣarahita)" (1994, 183).
54. The syllables *te* and *na* could correspond to the auspicious syllables called *tena*-s in the *Saṅgītaratnākara* (Shringy and Sharma 1989, 217); I asked Narayanan Nambyār about their meaning, and according to him they have a purely rhythmic function.
55. Even while explaining the rites performed to consecrate the temple, Rajagopalan writes that "all the purificatory rites have to be done for Nandin (personification of theatre) according to Śaiva method" (2000, 16).

and the material world. The ontological polarity of Śiva and Śakti is reiterated "horizontally" at each level of the cosmic hierarchy, which extends from the subtler levels to the grosser world of the physical universe. Thus, although they represent different stages of manifestation, the *maṟayil kriyā* and the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* are analogous and their structures are quite similar. The process is activated through an act of mirroring even in the *maṟayil kriyā* (Figure 13); the salutation offered by the *Cākyār* to the drum emblematic of *bindu* and identified with Nandikeśvara clearly represents the mirroring of the actor in the instrument. The two represent the same energy at a different stage of manifestation.

The mirror is an important object in temples and in ritual performances of Kerala. In several temples of Bhagavati (an alternative name for the goddess Kāli), a mirror made out of metal is kept in the sancta sanctorum (*śrīkōvil*) and represents the goddess. Similarly, in ritual art forms such as *Teyyāṭṭam* and *Mudiyēṭṭu* the performer, whose body has been transformed by means of face painting and costume, incorporates the deity by looking himself in a mirror (Freeman 1991, 238–40; Caldwell 1995, 299) and starts performing the dance steps of the deity guided by specific drumbeats. The mirror is also strongly linked with the temple theater. Tantric texts (Āgamas) of Kerala prescribe the use of a metallic mirror in place of wooden statues of deities when they are too big to be handled in order to perform the ritual of

Figure 13. The *Cākyār* salutes the *Nambyār* and the *miḻāvu*. Kalamandalam Sangeeth Cākyār (actor), Margi Usha (voice, *ilattāḷam*), Margi Saji Kumar, Kalamandalam Ravikumar Cākyār (*miḻāvu*).

purification through immersion in water (Rajagopalan 2000, 16).[56] The same procedure is adopted for the consecration of the temple theatre and its deity Nandikeśvara; thus, a mirror in which the theater has been reflected is kept under water for the prescribed time, during which great care is taken since anything happening to the mirror would affect the *caitanya* (consciousness) of the deity hosted in it (16).[57]

I posit that the *maṛayil kriyā* evokes the mirroring of the Self in the waters of existence,[58] of the pure *tattva*s in the *māyā tattva*s, or of the *bindu* in *māyā*—symbolically represented by the curtain—as described by various Tantras (see Figure 11 above). In the words of Flood:

> The five *śakti*s of the pure course are inversely reflected in the impure course below the *māyā tattva*. *Māyā* acts as a lens through which the powers of the pure course are channeled, becoming reflected in the limitations (*kañcuka*s). *Māyā* is the critical transition point from the pure and relatively unlimited to the impure and limited consciousness particularized in the individual experiment (*puruṣa*). (1993, 60)[59]

Soon after the salutation, the *Cākyār* performs numerous steps based on front–back and left–right movements and on diagonal oscillations; these correspond to the dynamics of oppositions created by the phrases in the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal* and, in a similar way, lead to a section creating a triangle. As transcription and analysis have demonstrated, in the last section of the *maṛayil kriyā* the *miḻāvu* creates a triangle (see Example 13 above). It is interesting to note that this triangle consists of five phrases composed by two parts associated with the movement of the right and left foot of the *Cākyār*. This stage and the number five correspond to the production of the physical *tattva*s, and the five gross elements (*pañcabhūta*s) in particular. This is clearly an invocation: at a microcosmic level, it produces the birth of the character, and, at a macrocosmic level, the manifestation of the physical universe. The latter is symbolically represented by the five steps (*pañcapada vinyāsa*) performed by the *Cākyār* just before the removal of the curtain. At first, facing the drum (Figure 14a) he moves his right leg towards the instrument, touches the floor with the foot, and moves it back to where it was. Then he performs the same step with the left leg. Then, turning his back to the drum (Figure 14b), he performs three steps toward the audience (Figure 14c). They stand for the three steps done by Viṣṇu in his incarnation as Vāmana, the dwarf, to cover the three worlds in the universe

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56. While Rajagopalan does not mention any Āgama in particular, the *tantri* Elangallur Narayanan Nambudiri told me that the text which describes those prescriptions is the fifteenth-century Śeṣasamuccaya.

57. Unni (2006, 329) mentions the Nartanaraṅganavikṛti Vyākyā, a treatise by an anonymous author, that describes the ritual for the renovation of a temple theater in a dilapidated condition; according to it, the divinity of the existing stage should be transferred into a mirror, then moved into a pot of water, and then to the main deity in the temple. Once the new temple theater is built, the divinity should be retransferred into it.

58. "As when the water moves, the moon [reflected there] seems to move, and when the water is still, seems to be still, so it is with this Self, the Great Lord, when reflected in the host of bodies, faculties, and worlds" (Abhinavagupta, Paramārthasāra 7). Commenting on this simile, Bansat-Boudon and Tripathi (2011, 93) explain that the moon stands for the God, its reflection for the limited Self, and water for the phenomenal world.

59. According to Abhinavagupta, "the 'great Emanation', projected outside Śiva or the supreme energy, is reflected in the supreme/non-supreme energy, so that the latter, working like a mirror, makes the *tattva*s appear in a reversed order, revealing first the one which comes last in Śiva" (Padoux 1990, 308).
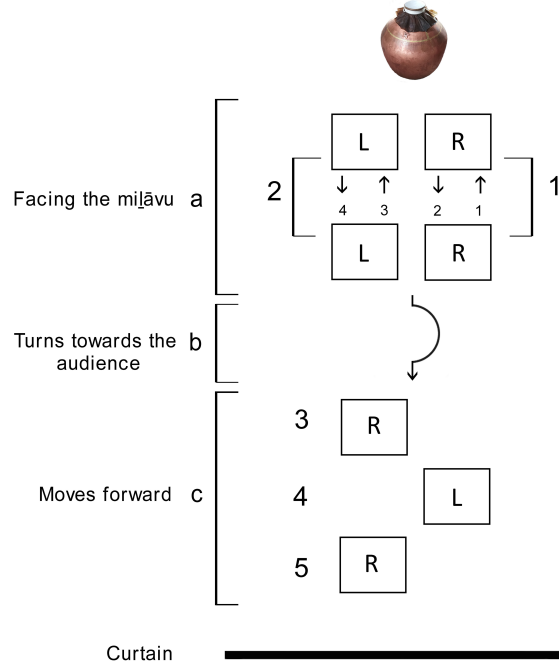
Figure 14. The *pañcapada vinyasa*.

(Nambyār 2005). Thus, symbolically, when the curtain is removed the universe is fully manifested and the character has been born and appears to the audience.

As the *maṟayil kriyā* is analogous to the *miḻāvoccappeṭuttal*, the *nitya kriyā*, like *gōṣṭhi*, is meant to establish order at both the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. The *Cākyār*, acting as stage director, performs short dances, then, accompanied by the songs of the *Naṅgyār*s, pays obeisance to the guardians of the eight directions (Johan 2017), describes Śiva and Pārvatī in their bodily appearance, and salutes by gestures:

> I pay obeisance to all the living and non living beings in this world, by bestowing flowers. From Brahma the creator to the meanest blade of grass; to the divine lords like Indra; sages like Narada; celestial beings like Yakṣas, Kinnaras, Gandharvas, Vidyādharas, Siddhacharanas, Asuras and Nāgas who live in the Netherworlds; earthly beings including Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, Śūdras and animals like cow and all birds. (Nair 1994a, 25)

At this stage of manifestation, the subtle sonic energies of Śiva and Śakti and their interaction have evolved into bodily Śiva and Pārvatī enacted by the *Cākyār* and the dense matter of the manifested world in its innumerable manifestations.[60]

To synthesize the entire process, we can say that, from a macrocosmic perspective, the

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60. "It is the recreation of the whole universe symbolically represented by the *maṇḍala* with Brahman, the Creator residing in its centre that is the centre of the stage as well" (Shulman 2012, 15).

puṟappāṭu symbolically re-enacts the manifestation of the universe in its subtle and gross states, generated in time and space (stage) by the sonic energy compressed in the primordial seed (*bindu*) or golden egg represented by the *miḻāvu*. In a similar way, from a microcosmic perspective, the *puṟappāṭu* is a re-enactment of the birth of a character (Sowle 1982, 249).[61] It also explains the different roles of the couple *Nambyār–Cākyār*: the *Nambyār* as *miḻāvu* player represents time and space, and subtle states of manifestation, while the *Cākyār* stands for the material manifestation of the cosmos in its innumerable faces and characters.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have demonstrated that musical analysis, combined with the information provided by contemporary performers, opens a new perspective on *puṟappāṭu* and shows it as a very well-structured ritual re-enacting a sonic cosmology according to Tantric theories. Furthermore, such cosmology is not only meaningful in the ritual section but also finds a coherent and rational execution in the drama itself, since the voice of the *miḻāvu* is the life-breath of the performance, providing sonic expression to the emotions of the actors and infusing energy to their bodily movements.[62]

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61. Interestingly, one of the purifying rites performed by Brahmins and the temple caste of the *Piṣāraṭi*s for the birth of a child is the so-called *vātil-puṟappāṭu*, the first bringing of the newborn child out of the walls of the house (Pisharoti 1926).
62. These aspects are the topic of another article in progress.

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