

TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND DA NCE IN CONTEM PORARY CULTU RE(S)

Jana Ambrózová
Bernard Garaj
(eds.)



**Traditional
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Nitra 2019

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Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

Published with support of the Ministry of Education,
Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic
Project VEGA 1/0852/17

First edition

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Translation into English and proofreading: Ľuboš Török,
Viktória Valentová Kukucsová, Ľuboš Valent, Marcos Perez,
Robert Charles Kochersberger, Shaun Williams

Layout & cover: Ľubo Balko

Cover photo: © Jana Ambrózová (Gejza Molnár, Nižná Kaloša, 2018)

ISBN 978-80-558-1477-3

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***Contemporary
Types of Ritualistic
South Indian Mizhavu
Percussion Ensembles
in Kerala***

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and K. Sajith Vijayan*

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The sacred and secular Mizhavu drum

Mizhavu, a single headed drum nowadays made of copper, is not a familiar instrument in the contemporary society. The reason behind that fact is the use of *Mizhavu* as a Deva Vadyam, pleasing Hindu Deities in ritualistic ancient Sanskrit Drama Art Forms in Kerala, such as *Koodiyattam*, *Chakyar* and *Nangyar Koothu*. All these Art Forms combine the performance of stories from the national epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* with the sound of the *Mizhavu* and other instruments such as cymbals, conch and *Edakka*, an hourglass shaped drum. In Tamil Nadu the term *Mizhavu* was the most widely used designation among other names like *Muzhavu*, *Muzhavam*, *Muzhai*, *Mizha*, *Kudamuzhai*. In the *Natyashastra* of Bharatamuni, written around 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. as manual for all kinds of artists, membranophones (*Avanaddha Vadya*) form one of the four categories of instruments beside string instruments (*Tata*), metallophones (*Ghana*) and wind instruments (*Sushira*). *Avanaddha Vadya* are consisting of more than hundred variations of three types of drums: *Mrdanga*, *Panava* and *Dardura*. The last type, to which the *Mizhavu* belongs, has just one head and is placed in an upright position within a wooden frame (Gupta 2003: 484–485).

Kettle drums are also designated as *Bhanda Vadya*: “References to *bhanda* are said to occur in Vedic literature; Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* mentions *vadhya bhanda*; *Ramayana* gives *kumba* (pot), and the Buddhist sacred book, *Pali Tripitaka*, refers to *kumba toonak* which some consider to be pot drums. *Natyashastra*, while talking of *bhanda vadya*, places them in a secondary position to the three main drums (*mridanga*, *dardura* and *panava*)” (Deva 2000: 65). P. K. N. Nambiar, *Mizhavu* Guru of the Nambiar Cast, refers to references about the *Mizhavu* in the books *Kaṇṇaśśarāmāyaṇam* and *Bāṇayuddhaprabhanda*: “*Kaṇṇaśśarāmāyaṇam* also has a reference to this instrument in ‘*iṭiyākina milāvoliyālēvaṛkkum paritāpam kaḷavān*’ [to remove the sorrows of everyone by the thundering sound of the *mizhāvu*]. *Bāṇa* has drummed on the *mizhāvu* impressively in accompaniment to the cosmic dance (*tāṇḍava*) of Lord Siva and was rewarded with a thousand hands – this allusion to the *mizhāvu* occurs in the *Bāṇayuddhaprabhanda* as ‘*ye vadyēna tavaprasādamatulam nṛttai purā pūrayam*.’ From all these scattered references, it is evident that the *mizhāvu* had been in popular use in this country for centuries” (Nambiar 1994: 102–103).

The form of *Mizhavu* can be elongated, round or egg shaped, according to the form of the temple theatres (*Koothambalam*), in which *Mizhavus* had been played exclusively. Only seventy years ago they had been taken to secular stages as well, and the tradition, formerly inherited by certain caste members, had been

opened to students of all castes. According to the *Mizhavu* percussionist Sajith Vijayan, co-author of this article, the veteran *Mizhavu* players still resist using that instrument for other kinds of instrumental music (Vijayan 2019).

Certain Hindu rituals are performed by a ceremonial leader (*Tantri*) for a new built sacred *Mizhavu* drum, which is regarded as a holy being (*Brahmacari*) itself: “There are many *samskarakriyas* (rituals) for *Mizhavu*. These are called *shodashakriyas*. In the text *Thantrasamuchayam*, these *kriyas* (rituals) are detailed, especially in the chapter titled ‘Mridangopanayanavidhi’ (ritual consecrating *Mizhavu* for its functioning)” (Interview with P. K. N. Nambiar, see Bindu 2013: 112–113). Rajagopalan (2005: 30) also mentioned the book *Sri Krishna Cithamani* written by Sri K.P. Krishnan Bhattathiripad as source for the initiation of *Mizhavu*. After the introductory rituals and prayers *Nandikeshvara* is invoked, who is a servant of *Lord Shiva*, procreator, destroyer, cosmic dancer and rhythm keeper within the Hindu Pantheon. Except for *upanishkramanam* (Sanskrit term describing a ritual for the newborn baby’s first leaving of the house) or *vathil purappadu* (Malayalam term) and marriage rituals the drum receives the same ceremonies as every Hindu. Secular *Mizhavu* drums do not receive any rituals.

The role of Mizhavu drums in Koodiyattam performances

The art of drumming is very common in Kerala and attached to a huge variety of performing art forms like Kathakali, Ottam Thullal, classical music, folk music and temple music. *Koodiyattam*, which is highly enriched with acting by postures, mudras, costumes, facial expressions and recited Sanskrit verses (*Slokas*), would be in a lifeless state without the sound of *Mizhavu*. It is said, without that instrument *Koodiyattam* is comparable to food without salt, spice and other flavours. The instrument is the life of the play. In *Natyashastra* it is said “*natyasya shayahi vadhanthi vadhyam*,” which means the instrument is the bed of the art. Beside space for sleep and relaxation, the role of bed is to amalgamate two persons in a lively way. If we think in that way, we can understand how the instrument amalgamates what all other subjects and aspects of this specific art form. It relates the act to music, music to rhythm, demonstration to experience and apart from that it is moreover indulging the viewer’s heart with the art form (Vijayan 2019).

In *Koodiyattam* performances more than one actor is representing certain acts of a Sanskrit drama on the stage, accompanied by two *Mizhavu*

percussionists: the more experienced percussionist improvises in response to the movements and emotions of the actors, while the second player keeps the rhythm in unison with the female cymbal (*Kuzhitalam*) players. *Nangiar Koothu* and *Chakyar Koothu* performances are solo performances, which request only one *Mizhavu* percussionist and one *Kuzhitalam* player (Bindu 2013: 37). Venu (2002: 175–178) mentioned that various Sanskrit dramas written on palm books, as well as acting and production manuals (*Attaprakaram* and *Kramadipika*) are still strictly under custody of the *Chakyar* families.

During performances, *Mizhavu* percussionists sit on wooden stands in the back of the stage, so their efforts to follow and musically support the actor's expressions demand a lot of concentration and knowledge.

The duties of the percussionists include a variety of functions in preparation for the performance and within: "They should know the meaning of each *slokam*, the differences in the Charis, *kriyas*, *parikramanam* (literally circumambulation). They should have a thorough knowledge of the *Aattaprakaram* (acting manual) and *Kramadeepika* (stage manual). In short, the Nambiar should have a complete knowledge of *Koodiyattam*. The Chakyars need not know the playing of the *Mizhavu*. Nambiar should know this, too. Nambiar must be more knowledgeable than the Chakyars. From the beginning till the very end of the play, Nambiar have the responsibility of stage" (Interview with P. K. N. Nambiar 2006, see Bindu 2013: 115).

The movement of each character is living with the sound of *Mizhavu*: the blossoms of flowers, the flight of a honeybee, the running river, demolition of a mountain, and the rolling noise of a chariot – all these imaginary aspects of performance will appear in the viewer's mind because of the play of *Mizhavu* (Vijayan 2019). *Mizhavu* thus is painting the atmosphere. Apart from that aspect, the drum provides a continuous rhythmic flow by producing certain *Talas* (rhythmic circles) in unison with the cymbals. The meaning of the term "Tala," which arises from a complex philosophical time concept of the *Atharvaveda*, undergoes various interpretations (Rowell 1992: 180): Mylius (1987: 184) translated the Sanskrit term "Tala" with "clapping," "clock," "dance" and "musical instrument" as well as "flat surface." Rowell (1992: 190) also described the term in relation to a measuring unit like the length of the hand or the face. In that sense *Tala* means a span of space or time.

In *Koodiyattam* there are three kinds of percussion systems, which are implemented by *Mizhavu* Percussionists:

1. Percussion for *Kriya Nritham*: Here the term "Kriya" is translated as "dance step," while "Nritham" means a form of motion, which is based only on *Talas* in the form of specific rhythmic musical phrases without

- specific facial expressions of the performers;
2. *Melam* (percussion performance) is based on the emotionally significant storyline in *Koodiyattam* in response to changing *Ragas* (melodies), *Rasas* (emotions received by the audience) and *Bhavas* (emotions created by the performers);
 3. *Melam* during passages without characters on the stage, where *Mizhavu* percussionists are given the opportunity to show and develop their musical skills independently from the drama, thus entertaining the audience, when there are no characters on the stage (Interview with P.K. Nambiar 2006, see Bindu 2013: 114). This kind of *Melam* was transformed to *Mizhavil Thayambaka* by P.K.N. Nambiar as a major presentation on stage.

Mizhavil Thayambaka

After the first steps by P. K. N. Nambiar, the major experiments have been done by our Guru Sri Kalamandalam Eswaranunni. In those experiments he integrated rhythmical techniques from other percussion art forms, mainly from the *Chenta* (cylindrical drum) drumming in temples, into the *Mizhavu Melam*. In that way he created *Mizhavu Madhala Thayambaka* (combined with the *Madhala* drum), *Mizhavu Idakka Thayambaka* (combined with *Idakka* drum), *Mizhavu Chenda Thayambaka* (combined with *Chenda* drum), *Mizhavu Thimila Thayambaka* (combined with *Thimila* drum), *Mizhavil Panjarimelam*, *Mizhavil Panjavadhyam* (five instruments combined), *Mizhavu Melam*, *Mizhavil Keli* and others. The most famous art forms in between these are *Mizhavil Thayambaka*, *Mizhavu Melam* and *Mizhavil Panjarimelam*, which will be presented in this paper for the first time (Vijayan 2019).

Mizhavil Thayambaka as an individual art form was performed on the stage 50 years ago by Sri P. K. Narayanan Nambyar. He developed this art form by copying the original *Chenta Thayambaka*. The rhythmical structure remains the same, but the playing technique on *Mizhavu* drums requests hands instead of drumming sticks.

Thayambaka consists of eight beats (eight *aksharakaalam*), which are arranged in *Chembada Talam* (four beats). Four ways (*ennam*) should be played. According to the abilities of the artist, those ways can be renewed or played in any type of *ennam*. These are finished with a phrase called “*kooru*” (jammed relation, touched relation with *patikaalam*, the starting part). There are three *kooru* in *Chenta* drumming: *adantha*, *panjari* and *chemba*. According to the high

speed of the other *koorus*, which would request sticks, only *adantha kooru* can be played on the *Mizhavu*. Recently Sajith's colleague K. Ratheesh Bass invented a new *kooru* for the *Mizhavu* named *kundanachi kooru* (16 beats).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ti ti	ta	Ti ti	ta	Ti ti	ta	Ta ta	ta

TABLE 1 *Adantha kooru*, 8 beats. *Ti* = played soft with three fingers on the edge of *Mizhavu*; *Ta* = played hard with full hand in the middle of *Mizhavu* (Vijayan 2019).

In this new *kooru* there are 16 *aksharakaalam* (beats). Four basic *ennams* should be played. After that *kooru* phrase, three more phrases called *idakkalam* (*Ta ti* alternately), *idanila* (*ta* and pause), *irukida* (continuous *Ta ta* in a fast



FIGURE 1 *Mizhavu Panja Thyambaka* at Palakkad Vadakkanthara Temple (2018). Photo: Sajith Vijayan.

speed) are added. The *Mizhavu Thyambaka* group consisting of six persons will play the *Tala* with two *Ilathalams* (big cymbals), two *Chenta* drums and two *Mizhavus*, while one *Mizhavu* percussionist will play phrases in between the beats (on the offbeat). According to the artists' daily practice (*sadhakam*) and

experience (*swadheenam*), duration and speed can be varied in many ways.

The full structure can be played within 45 minutes up to two hours. *Mizhavu Thyambaka* ensembles are invited to temples as well as annual temple festivals all over Kerala. Sometimes invitations to festivals in other Indian states are possible, even from abroad. In 2017 a Kalamandalam group performed *Mizhavu Thyambaka* in Paris (Vijayan 2019).

Mizhavu Panjari Melam

The term “Melam” means joint or amalgamated. It means the intersection of different instruments like *Mizhavu*, *Chenta*, *Ilathalam*, *Kombu* (horn), and *Kurumkuzhal* (pipe).

Most of the percussion art forms in Kerala integrating *Chenta* drums are related with temple festivals. *Melams* like *Panjari*, *Pandi*, *Thripuda*, *Chembada*, *Druvam*, *Adantha* and others are the rhythmic styles used by *Chenta* drumming. *Chenta*, *Valam Thala Chenda* (bass *Chenta*) or *Veekkam Chenda*, *Ilathalam*, *Kombu*, *Kurumkuzhal* (big cymbals, horn and pipe) are the instruments used for a *Melam*. After having adapted the rules of *Panjari Melam* in *Chenta* in 2005–2006 by Sri Eshwaranunni in Kerala Kalamandalam, the first *Panjari Melam* in *Mizhavu* happened. After that first performance, several performances followed up to the present time. Five *kalam*s as structure (Table 2) are common in *Panjari Melam*. *Pathikalam*, the first *kalam*, as well as the second *kalam* (*yandam kalam*) are not used in *Mizhavu Melams*, because the time space between the beats will be too large and become boring. It is not possible to sustain the rhythm in low tempo with the *Mizhavu*. Usually three, four and five *kalam*s are used in *Mizhavu Melams*. For each *kalam* repeated four to six times, the playing mode for percussion is *urulukol kalashangal* (rolls with drumsticks, but on *Mizhavu* played by hands in a high speed), *idakkalashangal* (middle phrase, next step) and *kuzhamari* (finishing *kalam*). Different *vakram* phrases are played to finish each *kalam*. To finish the full *Melam*, a phrase called *therukalasangal* is played (Vijayan 2019).

1 st kalam	96 beats (aksharakaalam)
2 nd kalam	48 beats
3 rd kalam	24 beats
4 th kalam	12 beats
5 th kalam	6 beats

TABLE 2 *Kalam structures* (Vijayan 2019).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Ti	ti	ta		ti		ti		ta	ta	ta	

TABLE 3 Example kriyas for the 4th kalam (Vijayan 2019).

1	2	3	4	5	6
Ti	ti	ti	ti	tei	

TABLE 4 Example kriyas for the 5th kalam (Vijayan 2019).

Mizhavu Melam and Eka Choozhadi Melam

In the tradition of seven Talas (*Eka*, *Rupakam*, *Jhampa*, *Tripata*, *Madhyam*, *Dhruvam*, *Ata*) of *Mizhavu* drumming, any of those can be selected by the arranger and prepared as *Mizhavu Melam*. According to the interest of players different rhythms can be selected. There is no common style for these *Melams*. Normally a *Melam* starts with *Druva Talam* (14 beats), then shifts to *Tripata Talam* (7 beats) and *Murkiya Tripata* (3 and a half beats). After that the rhythm moves forward to *Vidhushakande Eka Talam* or a phrase called “thakkitta” (Table 5), travels to the fast beat counts and ends it according to the feeling of the percussionists. Nowadays *Mizhavu Melam* also adds some aspects of *Panjari Melam* and *Thayambaka* (Vijayan 2019).

In 2005 and 2006 I spent several months at the Kerala Kalamandalam as the only female pupil of K. Eswaranunni, who is the (already retired) *Guru* of nearly all contemporary *Mizhavu* players in Kerala. In his classroom I met K. Sajith Vijayan, his senior student at that time, who is working as contemporary *Mizhavu* teacher in the same department since his graduation in 2007. During the first days I had to practice on a wooden table instead of a small practicing drum (*Abhyasakutty*). The first *Tala* I got to know was *Panjari Talam* in four speeds which has just been mentioned as “TaKiTa” (Bindu 2013: 88).

1	2	3	4	5	6
Ti	Ki	Ta	Ti	Ki	Ta
Tika	Taka	Ta	Tika	Taka	Ta
Tikatata	Takataka	Takataka	Tikatata	Takataka	Takataka

TABLE 5 *Panjari Talam* in three speeds. Chart by Karin Bindu.

Eka Choozhadi Melam is the only recently created *Melam*, which consists of seven *Talas*: *Ekam* (2 beats), *Roopam* (3 beats – 2 beats and one pause), *Chembada* (4 beats – 3 beats and one pause), *Karika* (5 beats – 4 beats and one pause), *Panjari* (6 beats – 5 beats and one pause), *Marmmam* (x.xx.xxx.xxxx.) and *Kumbham*. *Kumbham* is a rhythmic pattern with fixed strokes that is not repeated in the sense of a *Tala* (rhythmic cycle). The mnemonic syllables (*Vaittari*) for *Kumbham* are: thi thi thi thi thithe# thei. thithe#thei thei thi thei# (16 beats).



FIGURE 2 *Eka Choozhadi Melam* (Trichur, 2019). Photo: Sajith Vijayan.

In the beginning of a performance *Kumbham* gets repeated three times. After that *Marmmam Tala* (14 beats) starts (tei# thithe# thithithe#thithithe#). In this rhythm the *Melam* starts with *urulukol kalasham*, *idakkalasham*, *kuzhimarinja kalaasham* (*kuzhamari*) and *vakram* (to change the rhythm). After that phrases the composition changes to *Panjari Talam*. This whole *Panjari* part is the 5th *kalam* as described above.

When *Panjari Talam* ends, *Karika* rhythm starts. After that *Chembada* is played. Inside the *Chembada* the *Valiya Lakshmi Tala* is placed (thi thi thi thi thi thi they – thaka- thakata thakata thakata they – thaka-thithi they-thaka – thakaththey – thaka-dhithey- dhikathey-dhitheytha-dhikathakthey). After that *Roopam Talam* follows. The same phrase in *Kutiyattam* is called *Vidushakan Eka Tala*, in which one special *ennam* will be fixed.

In the following *Eka Talam* “thakkitta” is framed in a specific *ennam* (way), played by *Mizhavu* and *Kombu* in a call – response system, and ends with “theerukalasham” like *Panchari Melam* or any other *Chenta Melam*. This newest creation by Kalamandalam *Mizhavu Percussionists* got performed for the first time in March 2019 within the *Koodiyattam* Festival in Thrissur (Kerala). Kalamandalam *Dhanarajan*, Kalamandalam *Rathish Bhas*, Kalamandalam *Sajith Vijayan*, Kalamandalam *Rahul* presented the show which lasted for one and a half hours. The composition and direction were done by Mr. *Rathish Bass* (Vijayan 2019).

Conclusion

In Kerala’s *Koodiyattam* and *Koothu* performances based on Sanskrit dramas about certain characters from the Indian national epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, *Mizhavu* percussionists usually sit behind the actors. In *Natya Shastra* three varieties of *Mrdangam* are mentioned. *Mizhavu*, a sacred drum (*Deva Vadyam*), is considered as “*Oordhuwa mukha Mrdangam*” describing the upright position of the drum covered with calf skin on top. There are no other *Oordhuwa mukha Mrdangams* in India. The performance of the colorful dressed and masked actors and actresses will attract the audience more than the music. The ways of acting, the acting manuals and the stories written on palm leaves by authors and kept by members of the *Chakyar*, *Nambiar* and *Nangiar* caste families have been a source of research topics followed by Indian as well as international scientists. Apart from the author’s thesis and articles, research about the *Mizhavu* drum as a leading instrument within that new art forms has primarily been done by the great gurus like P. K. N. *Nambiar* and his pupil *Sri K. Eswaranunni* in their language Malayalam.

By creating new musical forms like *Mizhavu Thyambaka* and various forms of *Mizhavu Melams*, the percussionists place themselves into the center of the stage as well as attracting the audience. The compositions of the new created art forms follow complex metrical structures, that are influenced by other kinds of temple music like *Chenta Thayambaka* and *Chenta Melam* and can also be based on the tradition of seven *Talas* (metric cycles) used in *Kootiyattam* and *Koothu* performances. *Talas* are noted in certain mnemonic syllables (*Vaittari*), which not only help to memorize the rhythmical structure, but also contain all information about the drumming technique on the instrument.

A *Mizhavu* percussion group consists of a variable number of male players. Other instruments like *Chenta* drums, big cymbals, horn and pipe are integrated

into the ensemble depending on the performance style. Apart from written works in Malayalam language by P. K. N. Nambiar and K. Eswaranunni, there have not been any scientific studies and transcriptions of the variety of *Mizhavu Melams* and *Mizhavu Thyambaka*. These new art forms are at present flourishing all over Kerala. *Mizhavu* percussionists of ten different *Koodiyattam* centers are involved into the artistic process of *Mizhavu Melam* development.¹

Endnotes

1. For further reading see also Eswaranunni 2010; Gramaprakasan 2007; Nair 1994; Nambiar 2005; Pisharoty 1994; Rajagopalan 2005, or Venugopalan 2007.

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Traditional Music and Dance in Contemporary Culture(s)
Jana Ambrózová, Bernard Garaj (eds.)

ISBN 978-80-558-1477-3

