Performing Myths: A Comparative Study of Two Ritual Performances from India and Iran

A Thesis Submitted to the University of Hyderabad for the award of a Ph. D. Degree in Theatre Arts
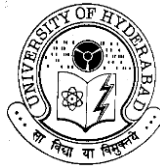
By
Afshin Amouzadeh Lichaei
(06SNPT03)

Department of Theatre Arts
Sarojini Naidu School of Arts & Communication
University of Hyderabad
(P.O.) Central University, Gachibowli
Hyderabad – 500046
Andhra Pradesh (India)

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DECLARATION

I Afshin Amouzadeh Lichaei (06SNPT03) hereby declare that this thesis entitled **Performing Myths: A Comparative Study of Two Ritual Performances from India and Iran** submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Prof. B. Ananthakrishnan is an original and independent research work. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma.

Date: Name: Afshin Amouzadeh Lichaei

                                         Signature of the Student:

                                         Regd. No. (06SNPT03)

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that **Performing Myths: A Comparative Study of Two Ritual Performances from India and Iran** is a bonafide work done by Mr. Afshin Amouzadeh Lichaei, a research scholar for Ph. D. programme in Theatre Arts, Sarojini Naidu school of Arts & Communication, University of Hyderabad, under my guidance and supervision.

The thesis has not been submitted previously in part or full to this or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma.

_____

Prof. B. Ananthakrishnan

Date   Supervisor

_____   _____

Prof. B. Ananthakrishnan   Prof. Vinod Pavarala

Head, Department of Theatre Arts   Dean

Sarojini Naidu School of Arts & Communication
University of Hyderabad

Acknowledgements

As a theatre teacher and theatre practitioner in Iran, before coming to University of

Hyderabad to take up the Ph. D. research I had only a moderate knowledge of Indian

performance traditions through reading books available in Persian and English. I have

taken up the task of this comparative study to understand the performance culture of

India and to compare with the ritual form Ta'ziyeh practiced in Iran. During the

process of understanding the diverse performance forms of India I could realise that it

is not possible to do it in a general level because of the unique and complex nature of

each form practiced in India. It is difficult to find common features for Indian

performance forms practiced in different cultures, regions and in languages. One life

time is not enough to study the diverse forms of a single region. As a student coming

from another country and culture it is further difficult to understand the diverse kinds

of relationships around a performance as there are many cultural elements involved in

it like caste, belief system etc. After a brief survey through reading and field visits I

have decided to focus one form and it was Mudiyettu, a ritual form practiced in the

southern state Kerala. The reason for this choice was the similarities and cultural

differences between Mudiyettu and Ta'ziyeh. Both of them are based on two different

myths, in which Mudiyettu is emerged directly from a sacred myth and Ta'ziyeh is

based on a historical narrative, later transformed in to a myth. These insights were given by my supervisor Prof. B. Ananthakrishnan and he extended his support to understand the form Mudiyettu through translation of the performance and informing the cultural aspects of performances in Kerala and its structures. As I was not very flair in English he has helped me to catch up the proficiency in English and corrected the drafts with a lot of patience. He introduced different theoretical aspects required for the analysis and taught me how to apply it to my research situation. I am thankful to him for enabling me to complete the thesis.

Mr. A. S. Devendranath, a freelance theatre practitioner and researcher helped me in field work in terms of understanding the Mudiyettu with necessary inputs and he had translated many articles in Malayalam on the form and briefed me for my research work. Finally he has done the cross verification of information I have put in the thesis for factual accuracy as I am from another country and language. I thank him for his enormous support extended to me.

My sincere gratitude to thousands of anonymous and humble taziyeh performers whose hearts beats in their performance and who with all their love and passion, patiently dedicated their lives to ta'ziyeh theatre. Through their work they created one of the most complicated theatrical forms in the world and by playing with reality they tried to change their lives and the surrounding world across centuries and during the toughest periods of Iranian history.

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Introduction

This doctoral thesis deals with two ritualistic folk art forms: the Iranian Ta'ziyeh and the Indian Mudiyettu. It should be obvious that the thesis tries to bring together two diverse forms of performances and two completely different forms of ritual traditions. An introduction should, at first, try to justify such an eclectic choice. The answer lays on the one hand the personal choice of the researcher and on the other, the fascination for an art form that symbolizes and represents the most complex and colourful form of Indian performative tradition.

Like any other child growing up in the Iran of the 1970s, my childhood memories had been marked by the experience of visiting innumerable Tekiehs during the Muharram seasons. As the Ta'ziyeh performance got into its elements I watched in rapt attention. The martyrdom of Hussein, the war, the valiant Hussein's refusal to bow down to the Tyrant Yazid's army, Kasim's marriage celebrations, I watched all this with a sense of awe. Ta'ziyeh has been at the center of the culture of Iran that I grew up in. And the experience of visiting the Tekiah with my grandmother never lost its novelty. So when I opted for a PhD at the University of Hyderabad on the comparative study of ritualistic folk art forms in Iran and India, I never had a doubt about the Iranian art form. Ta'ziyeh was the natural choice. But I looked at the amazing variety of art forms and ritual forms that India had to offer.

It took me a lot of time to zero in on the Indian art form that I wanted to work on. My explorations took me in different directions. India had to offer a number of traditions and performative forms. A selection became difficult. My reading took me to different directions. The Nautanki of north India, Therukkuthu of Tamil Nadu, Jatra of West Bengal, Ram Lila of north Indian villages, there were choices abound. But I was fascinated by the syncretism that

characterized the traditions of south Indian folk theatre. My further explorations took me to Kerala and its variations of traditions.

Kerala had a variety of traditions to offer: Theyyam of northern Kerala, Kanyarkali and Velakali of Palakkad, Patayani of south Kerala and Thira of north Kerala. But I had to come to Mudiyettu that in a variety of ways represented the mingling of various texts and traditions. What attracted me most were the particular history of Kerala folk culture and the coming together of various texts within that tradition. And Mudiyettu represented this syncreticism at its best.

The south Indian folk cultures are significant in their layered narratives that bring together both Dravidian and Aryan / Vedic religious elements. In the case of Kerala, where the arrival of Vedic brahminism had been rather late, the layered structure of tribal rituals become rather obvious[1]. And Mudiyettu represents this palimpsest both in its written/oral text and the most important performance text. The parellals with Ta'ziyeh were never obvious. But a deeper analysis and the reading of several scholars including Turner, and Schechner brought the hidden layers to the level of the apparent. And my choice of an Indian form was decided. It was undoubtedly Mudiyettu, the war between Bhadrakali, the wrathful mother and the evil incarnate, Darika.

The introduction also demands a brief discription to Ta'ziyeh, the foremost ritualistic folk performance of Iran. It lays its foundations in the history of Islam and the political and theological struggles during the early days of the religion. My first chapter dealt in details with this.

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[1] Menon, Sreedhara A. *Social and cultural history of Kerala* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1979)

Since both Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu are ritualistic forms that are inseparably linked to religious beliefs, the first chapter had to look at the history of religion, especially Islam and Hinduism, and the rituals emanating from religious beliefs. This led me to a detailed discussion of theories that govern the ideas of 'religion', Islam, Hinduism and 'ritual'.

With a researcher's interest, I went into the study of the category of 'religion'. As I found,

> The term 'religion' has its etymological roots in Latin. It comes from the Latin religiō. The ultimate origins of religiō are not known. Some theoreticians see the possibility that the term might be a derivation from a reduplicated *le-ligare, an interpretation traced to Cicero connecting lego "read", i.e. re (again) + lego in the sense of "choose", "go over again" or "consider carefully". Scholars like Tom Harpur and Joseph Campbell argue that the origins are from ligare "bind, connect", probably from a prefixed re-ligare, i.e. re (again) + ligare or "to reconnect," which was made prominent by St. Augustine, following the interpretation of Lactantius[2].

My first chapter discussed this category further. And I found the importance of ritualistic and symbolic elements within the category of religion. My primary findings were about the historical and space specificity of religions. Religions, as I explain in the first chapter, take shape in specific historical circumstances. They correspond to the societies in which they take shape and seek to order the life within those societies. And I underline the collective character of the religious experience. This later led me to the shared character of the performance and reception of Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu. From this point, I moved on to the importance of the aspect of performance in religion:

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[2] Daniel, Dubuisson. *The western construction of religion: myths, knowledge, and ideology* (U S :The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) 22-23

Performances mark identities, bend and remake time, adorn

the body with costumes, and provide people with behaviour that

is "twice-behaved", not-for-the-first time, rehearsed, cooked, prepared[3].

My further explorations into the category of "religion" made me reject the ahistoricity that surrounds the theoretical understanding of religions. I come to the conclusion that religions work in accordance with the specificities of the societies that it seeks to govern. These variations are also reflected in the regional variations of the performance of the rituals. I look at the performance of Ta'ziyeh to validate this point. Tazia is performed in India is as well but it differs from the performance in Iran. This shows that religion and the rituals that they shape are specifically modelled for the context in which it develops and the performance reflects this context specificity.

I specifically look at the history and development of two religions that are at the centre of the two art forms that are at the focus of my work.

My discussion of Islam focused on its history and its development through the first few years of its existence. Since Ta'ziyeh is one of the main points of my discussion, my discussion of Islam concentrated on the struggles within the religion and the birth of Shiyah and Sunni sects. Ta'ziyeh commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein on the plains of Karbala and encompasses in it the history of the struggles within the religious organisation that led to the eventual death of the Imam. To sketch this background, the first chapter and the beginning of

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[3] Schechner Richard, Performance Studies Textbook 2nd Draft, Unpublished Manuscript, July 1995.

the second chapter gives a detailed historical and political picture of the political and theological struggles that gripped the religion following the death of the Prophet.

As I quote Jabber Anasori,

> Hussein's murder was the outcome of a protracted power struggle for control of the nascent Muslim community following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Two factions is come with competing views on the leadership selection process for the head of the community of Shiites, advocated that the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad possessed a divine right to authority in both spiritual and temporal matters for Karbala[4].

The first chapter also focuses on Hinduism, the religious belief system from where the seed idea of the performance of Mudiyettu is emerged. My study of the religion brings out one characteristic feature of the religion that marks it clearly different from the monotheistic Islam—its willingness and tendency to co-opt divergent and diverse traditions in a process of continuous remaking and evolution. I treat Hinduism as a cultural phenomenon rather than a religious system with prescribed rules and traditions. As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan states, Hinduism cannot be defined, but is only to be experienced[5]. Others have seen the religion as a category with "fuzzy edges", rather than as a well-defined and rigid entity[6]. It is safe to assume that the religion has a set of texts and practices that are its core but it also allows for and leaves room for a number of subtexts, regional variations, deviations based on caste and ethnic variations and encompasses occult and monotheistic streams. I also must admit that by

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[4] Anasori, Jabber. *History of Iranian drama* (Tehran: Shikh safi Publication, 1992) 87

[5] Radhakrishnan,Sarvepalli. *Bhagavad Gita*: "Hinduism is not just a faith. It is the union of reason and intuition that cannot be defined but is only to be experienced."

[6] Ferro-Luzzi. *The Polythetic-Prototype Approach to Hinduism* in G.D. Sontheimer and H. Kulke (ed.) *Hinduism Reconsidered.* (Delhi: Manohar ,1991) 187-95

years spent in India and my conversations with the Indian friends have also contributed to my understanding of the religion and its culture.

Both Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu are first and foremost rituals that codify beliefs and religious practices. And the understanding and study of these rituals had to begin with the study of the concept of rituals. I used theories of Richard Schechner, Arnold van Gennep, Emile Durkheim and Victor Turner to understand the category.

I began the study of the rituals with the ideas borrowed from Schechner:

> "Rituals are a way people remember. Rituals are memories in action, encoded into actions. Rituals also help people (and animals) deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed or violate the norms of the daily life."[7]

The discussion further led me to the performative aspect of the rituals and the ideas of Durkheim. Later, I explored ideas of liminality, communitas, etc as stated by Gennep and developed by Turner.

> Thus liminality is frequently linked to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to wilderness or to an eclipse of the sun or moon. Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. [...] Their behaviour is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly and accept arbitrary punishment without complaining. It is as if they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition, to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new stations in life.

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[7] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 24

Among themselves, neophytes tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism.[8]

I later developed these ideas and applied them to the study of both Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu. The results have been rewarding as chapters two and three would prove. The idea of liminality, especially, had a significant application in the study of Mudiyettu. My analysis of the ritualistic elements in Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu was primarily based on the categories articulated by Schechner: Following Schechner, there are four perspectives from which rituals can be studied and understood.

- Structure: What rituals look and sound like, how they use space, who performs them, and how they are performed.

- Functions: What rituals accomplish for groups, cultures and individuals.

- Processes: The underlying dynamics driving rituals; how rituals enact and bring about change.

- Experiences: What it is like to be "in" a ritual[9].

My study of Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu closely followed this model and developed these categories further.

The second chapter is a detailed analysis of the origin, development, and performance structures of Ta'ziyeh. I draw upon variety of sources to locate the art form in its political, historical, social, and cultural milieu of Islam. The works of Rebecca Ansary Pettys and Peter Chelkowsky formed the back ground of my study as I also drew upon my personnel

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[8] Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process*: *Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969) 95

[9] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 49.

experiences. It is impossible to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of Ta'ziyeh without first locating it in the specific histories of Islam and Persia. The original development of the form after the centuries following the martyrdom of Hussein had the context of the flourishing Shiyah culture and the impetus given by the monarchs of Safavid dynasty. Persian rulers had their interests in valorising the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and these political interests had a deep impact on the specific trajectory taken by Ta'ziyeh.

> The divine right of kings, which was an established Persian tradition when the Islamic conquest toppled their Sassanid dynasty, served to colour Persian response to the struggle for succession. Already favourably inclined towards Ali because of their kingship traditions and alarmed at the growing power of the Omayyuds, the Persians began to view the cause of Ali as the cause of the oppressed. Persian resentment of Arab chauvinism crystallized into a hatred directed specifically at the expanding authority of Omayyud leadership, and their sympathy for Ali's cause became active partisanship of his family. Shahrbanu's marriage to Hussein provided an additional link between Persian sympathy and Ali, since it united the Persian ruling line to Ali's house. It is not surprising; therefore, that the Shi'yah ritual in Persia should focus on the tragedy of Karbala or that Hussein should function as their martyr par excellence. The Persian resentment of Arab rule, the establishment of the Shi'yah sect, and the ritual mourning ceremonies are interrelated factors influencing the development and function of the Ta'zieh[10].

Following Chelkowsky, I looked at the specific performative aspects of the art form. I followed Chelkowsky through the scene of Kasim's wedding to realise the dynamics through

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[10] Pettys, Rebecca Ansary. The *Ta'zieh: Ritual Enactment of Persian Renewal:* Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1981) 341-354

which the audience comes to identify with the sacrifice of the beloved Imam. My analysis also looked at various elements of the performance. There is a detailed analysis of Tekieh, where the performance takes place. I have traced the development of the Tekieh through the centuries and used the description of Chelkowsky to denote the grand proportions the structure has achieved in the modern age. The case in point is the description of the Tekieh Dowlat:[11]

> I was invited to attend on the fifth day of the Ta'ziyeh. We arrived at the Tekieh toward noon. On alighting from the carriage I was surprised to see an immense circular building as large as the amphitheatre of Verona, solidly constructed of brick. Ferashes, or liveried footmen, cleared the way before us. Thrashing their staves right and left, they opened a way through the crowd that packed the great portal; and entering a dark, vaulted vestibule I groped, or rather was impelled by the throng, towards a staircase crowded with servants whose masters had already arrived. Like all stairs in Persia, these were adapted to the stride of giants.[12]

My analysis of Ta'ziyeh also focused on one of the most important elements of its performance: The involvement of the spectators in the performance. Ta'ziyeh (and Mudiyettu, as we will see later) encourages involvement of the audience and their active participation in the performance.

> Taziyeh, a passion play depicting the Muharram tragedy, was developed, in which the people were not passive spectators, but provided the emotional response, weeping and beating their breasts, and joining their own sorrows to

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[11] The most famous and influential of the nineteenth century Ta'ziyeh theatres was the Tekieh Dowlat, or Royal Arena Theatre in Tehran (construction started 1304 A.H.)

[12] Chelkowski ,Peter J. *Ta'ziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran* (Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1, Inc. Spring, 1977) 36

the suffering of Imam Hussein. The rituals provided an important safety valve. As they mourned, slapped their foreheads, and wept uncontrollably, the audience aroused in themselves that yearning for justice, who is at the heart of piety, asking him or her why the good always seemed to suffer and evil nearly always prevailed[13].

I later, in the fourth chapter, developed this idea of spectator participation using various theoretical concepts and reached at the confluence of this participatory performance and cathartic effects that they have on the spectators. The analysis also looked at various theatrical elements of Ta'ziyeh including makeup, costumes, stage design, etc.

My third chapter had the performance of the ritualistic folk art form Mudiyettu at its centre. Mudiyettu, the ancient temple art form of Kerala, has its roots in the religious myth that symbolises the victory of the divine over the evil. I went to the etymological roots of the term and found the legends and myths that form the background of the performances. The chapter provides a detailed retelling of the myth and its many variations, drawing upon various textual and other sources. I immensely benefitted from my interactions with Mr Devendranath who gave me a detailed picture of the performance and translated various relevant passages from the works of Dr CR Rajagopal and G Bhargavan Pillai for my use.

The study amply reflects that the text and performance of Mudiyettu has been drawn from a variety of sources that range from the Vedic rituals to the tribal ceremonies. As I understood, it is impossible to gauge the significance of Mudiyettu without understanding the concept of *gramam* or villages where the form took its roots. I also looked at the various categories and concept to enter the varied and multifaceted arena that Mudiyettu presents. I studied the category of *Kavu* or the village temple which is the space of performance for Mudiyettu.

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[13] Hasan Sojodi , *Taziyeh in Iran*, (Tehran: Ghatreh Publication, 2006) 36

Mudiyettu revolves around the figure of mother goddess Bhadrakali. And it is imperative that we understand the nuances of this mother figure. Bhadrakali, the blood-thirsty and malevolent form of mother goddess, has few parallels across the world. The Greek goddess Diana can be seen as a comparison, but in terms of malevolence, Diana does not compare with Bhadrakali. She is seen as an angry goddess thirsty for the blood of the evil. Her representations themselves are intimidating to say the least. She is as patient as mother earth but, if provoked, she is malevolent par excellence. The figure of mother goddess has its roots in the Shivite traditions of Hinduism that flourished in South India. The chapter relates the various myths and legends that form the background of the myth of Bhadrakali. I found that the figure of Bhadrakali has its origin in the *gotra* traditions of Dravidian villages that date back to the time before the arrival of the Aryans. The myth was transformed the influence of the Vedic religion and the performance of the ritual has clear influence of Brahminic traditions.

The third chapter further analysed the performance structure of Mudiyettu and went through the various stages of the performance—from the rituals that precede the actual performances, through the various episodes till the rituals that conclude the ritual performance. I have given detailed and graphic descriptions of all the major characters and their narratives. These include the all important and awe inspiring Kali, the comic figure of Kuli, the social commentator in Nayar, the fearful figure of Darika, and other figures such as Shiva and Narada. The analysis also looked at elements such as make-up, stage and settings, musical elements, texts of Thottampattu and Kalampattu, and most importantly the performance text evolved by the improvised acting of the performance.

As in the case of Ta'ziyeh, the discussion of Mudiyettu does not conclude without looking at the element of the spectator involvement. I studied the various elements within the performance that heighten this participation to a level of direct interaction between the

devotee and the divine. This element of the performance has also been looked at in terms of the various techniques that the performance evolves that take the spectators to the role of performers. Also, the analysis looked at the embedded caste and religious structures that play out in the performance of Mudiyettu.

The last chapter of this work analysed Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu and looked at the divergences and similarities between the two ritual performances. This was a tricky exercise as i was looking at two forms that had completely divergent context s and histories, and it was impossible to de-contextualise them or take them out of the deeply religious structures in which they were embedded. Instead of doing an ahistoric comparative study I chose to look at various elements of performance using a range of theoretical frame works. The theorists who figure prominently in this discussion include Schechner, Turner, Agasto Boal, Bertold Brecht, Chelkowsky, Patrice Pavis, Ervin Goffman, among others.

The chapter looked at, using Durkheim, how the performance of rituals actualises the abstract. I analysed how the art forms used conventions of theatre to achieve this. In this context, I analysed the marriage scene in Ta'ziyeh and the use of lighting and other elements in Mudiyettu. Especially in the case of Mudiyettu, I have shown how stage setting and use of light and the effective use of costumes and makeup find their full use in the actualisation of the myth that hardly has any historic validity. I have specifically discussed the actualisation of the mythic figure of Kali. The entry of Kali uses the distribution light to the fullest extent. The bright torches, as they reflect on the bright colours of her costume, produce a psychedelic effect which converts the magic into the mundane.

In a more thematic comparison, I also looked at the underlying similarities between the legends and histories that find their expressions in the performance of the rituals. I go back to the thematic element of the good vs evil and the variations of this theme in both the forms.

One is often made to ask the question whether the martyrdom of Hussein is indicative of the eventual victory of the evil. I prove, quoting Pettys and other sources that this is not the case and show that the variation is a way in which Ta'ziyeh accommodates the rules of Islamic beliefs in the actual performance.

Further analysing the performance structures of both these forms, I come across the meta-communication that is embedded in them. I locate Nayar in Mudiyettu and Hussein after his resurrection as such meta-communicators. I defined meta-communication as a signal that tells receivers how to interpret the communication they are receiving." (ref Scechner P 92). I further analysed this aspect using the alienation technique evolved by Brecht. Brecht; alienation technique disturbs the familiar concepts of theatricality. Till then, the plot, dialogue and the characters were designed in such a way that the audience were taken along the progression of the play. The aim was, as John Willet points out,

> [T]o show everything in a fresh and unfamiliar light, so that the spectator is brought to look critically even at what he has so far taken for granted [...] In fact, it is not simply the breaking of illusion (though that is one means to the end); and it does not mean "alienating" the spectator in the sense of making him hostile to the play. It is a matter of detachment, of reorientation: exactly what [Percy Bysshe] Shelley (1792-1822) meant when he wrote that poetry "makes familiar objects to be as if they were not familiar", or [Arthur] Schopenhauer (1788-1860) when he claimed that art must show "common objects of experience in a light that is at once clear and unfamiliar."[14]

This alienation, as I have shown, inspires the spectators into self-interrogation and piety, as is evident in the case of Hussein's metanarrative in Ta'ziyeh. Through the metanarrative they

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[14] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 153

realise that while celebrating the martyrdom, they are also making themselves aware of their guilt. As Shehriari explains it, "Do not forget that the people who committed the atrocities against Imam Hussein were themselves Muslims.... How could they behead the person whom their own Prophet would place on his lap and kiss as a child, and not feel guilt?"[15]

This alienation also encourages and enhances the participation of the spectators, raising them to the level of "spect-actors". I use this category as evolved by Boal to explain the dynamics of the alienation effects in Mudiyettu.

> In order to understand the poetics of the oppressed one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people — "spectators," passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon — into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action. [...] This spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary he himself assumes the protagonist role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change—in short, trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution. [...] It is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which all possible paths may be examined[16].

This theoretical leap helps me understand the social role of Nayar in a more effective way. His social commentary and social criticism is aimed at, as I have shown in the last chapter, inspiring the audience into a participation that goes beyond the mere act of devotional submission to the deity.

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[15] Khosrow Shahriari, *Iranian Theater* (Tehran :Amir kabir press, 1992) 231

[16] Boal, Augusto, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (NewYork: Theatre Communications Group,1985) 122-138

From this point I moved on to analyse the element of spectator participation that is common to both Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu. I used the theories of Pavis to distinguish between the categories of "audience" and "spectators". I located the collective consciousness to which the two art forms aim their messages.

Looking at the various elements of Mudiyettu I discussed the means by which the involvement of the spectators is elevated to a level where they become part of the performance. I looked at the space of the performance in both Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu and the use of the space by the performers to see how the spectators get involved. I recognised the elements of environmental acting in this use of space by performers and saw its implications on the spectator's response.

The spontaneity of the interactions between the audience and the performers became obvious to me in the deeper analysis of both these forms. As I argue, the performances themselves find their meanings in the participation of the spectators. Also, this participation leads to the crystallization of the social relationships. I used the ideas of Erving Goffman to validate this point:

> A "performance" may be defined as all the activities of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. […] When an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise: defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that

each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of

occasions to the same kinds of audience or an audience of the same persons.[17]

And I could connect this with the element of spontaneity in ritual performances described by

Turner:

> Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their
>
> ritual and theatrical performance. [...] A performance is dialectic of "flow",
>
> that is, spontaneous movement in which the action and awareness are one, and
>
> "reflexivity", in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are
>
> seen "in action," as they shape and explain behaviour. A performance is
>
> declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular
>
> cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another's
>
> performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies[18].

Taking this point further, I looked at the possibilities of improvisation within the strictly

codified performances like Mudiyettu and Ta'ziyeh. Unlike the latter, Mudiyettu allows for

improvisation. It allows for a separate performance text that evolves in the actual

performance. This led me to the question how this "de-formation", as Pavis calls it, manages

to convey the codes without interruption, considering that the ritual performances are highly

codified. This led me to a discussion of the cultural specificities of ritual performances and

the dangers of de-contextualisation. Pavis's theories regarding the space-temporal equations

have also been applied in the study of these two art forms.

These actor-spectator dynamics and modes of acting took me further into 'trance acting' and

catharsis. Trance acting has an important place in Mudiyettu. The performance of the role of

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[17] Goffman,Erving. *The Presentation to Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, New York:Doubleday,1959) 15-16
[18] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 13

Kali is characterised by this trance acting. In the state of trance the performer approximates the divine. But in the case of Ta'ziyeh which is strictly govern by the rules Islamic beliefs which forbade the representation of the divine, trance acting has no place. Instead the performance elevates the spectators to a state of trance concluding in the cathartic phase.

> Taziyeh, a passion play depicting the Muharram tragedy, was developed, in which the people were not passive spectators, but provided the emotional response, weeping and beating their breasts, and joining their own sorrows to the suffering of Imam Hussein. The rituals provided an important safety valve. As they moaned, slapped their foreheads, and wept uncontrollably, the audience aroused in themselves that yearning for justice, who is at the heart of piety, asking him or her why the good always seemed to suffer and evil nearly always prevailed[19].

I defined Catharsis or katharsis (Ancient Greek: Κάθαρσις) as "cleansing" or "purging"[20]. This purging or cleansing is the end of the performance of Ta'ziyeh as they celebrate Hussein's martyrdom and interrogate their own guilt. After performing the penance, they go away with a stronger sense of belonging to the community.

I see this sense of belonging as the central element and the aim of such performances. These performances, as Turner points out, are the means by which the society plays out the social crisis and achieves harmony. They are, in other words, safety valves for the embittered elements within the community. As Turner says, these "definitional ceremonies" are a kind of "collective autobiographies", through which a group "creates its identity by telling itself a story about itself, in the course of which it brings to life its Definite and Determinate

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[19] Hasan Sojodi , *Taziyeh in Iran* (Tehran: Ghatreh Publication, 2006) 36

[20] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catharsis ,19 Aprl.2010

Identity." The living presence is connected to a glorious past. These are, as Turner terms it, "social dramas" through which a community comes to its own. They help the community "take stock of their own current situation: the nature and strength of their social ties, the power of their symbols, the effectiveness of their legal and moral controls, the sacredness and soundness of their religious traditions...."[21] (By means Turner 9)

My explorations into the two art forms have taken me to a deeper understanding of ritual performances themselves and their deep roots in our cultural and religious consciousness. These are performances that appeal to our collective consciousness and bind us together as communities and they collectivise our disparate individual identities. We have deep yearnings to be part of a crowd, to become one of the spectators rather than the lone audience. As Pavis notes, it is this transformation from the audience to the spectator, from the individual consciousness to the collective consciousness that is celebrated in the ritualistic performances.[22] The rituals bring society together and maintain the values and common belief. But these theoretical digressions notwithstanding, one needs to look at these performative forms as part of the collective consciousness of tradition and humanity.

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[21] Turner, Victor. "Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama": ed. Schechner, Richard,Willa Appel. *By means of Performance: intercultural studies of theatre and* ritual (New York: Cambridge university Press, 1991) 9

[22] Pavis, Patrice. Tran David Williams, *Analyzing performance: theater, dance, and film*(Michigan: Michigan Press, 2003) 228

Chapter 1

Religion, Ritual and Performance: The Memories in Action

> Present at the graveside and at the feast; eulogist, satirist, story-teller, musician, recorder of past achievements and commentator of his own times... some were evidently the laureates of their age, performing alone before kings; others provided together choir or orchestra at court or a great man's table, and yet others, it is plain, won a humble livelihood and local fame among peasants and in public places.[23]

Thus, even in the times of the Alexander (334-323 BC), the "gosan", the minstrel-poet and the prototype of the modern theatrician/performer, was a ubiquitous presence in the life his/her society. One might see a parallel to this in the figure of *suta*, an important element and performer of Indian mythology. *Suta* relates the tales from Mahabharatha. Further, such minstrel-poets abound in the Eastern narrative traditions. Chakyarkuthu, a temple art form performed in Sanskrit, in Kerala is centred on a similar kind of performer narrating mythological tales. On the other hand, folk art forms prevalent in Kerala like Thottampattu also have such narrators. In the Eastern tradition, these narrators are the keepers of traditions and history. He/she told the stories to, and of, the society and propagated the values that were the cornerstones of its existence. And thus, inevitably, he/she was the propagator and keeper of religious values, read as a system of laws that govern the society. These minstrel/poets may have been the precursors of many art forms that based themselves on the mission of propagating and establishing the superiority of religion. This work looks at two such forms –

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[23] M, Boyce. *The Parthian "gosan" and Iranian minstrel tradition* (Journal of Royal Asiatic Society, 1957) 10-45. Also M. Boyce, *Parthian literature* (Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. III (2), 1983) 1155-56

Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu. But before launching into an analysis and comparison of these two forms, we need two define and refine the terms under consideration. This chapter will define 'religion' and look at its wider implications on the society, and consider the importance of rituals and their performative aspects.

By definition, religion is the belief in, and worship of, a god or gods, or any such system of belief and worship[24]. It usually takes the form of devotional and ritual observances and often contains a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs. As the definition amply reflects, the aim of a religious belief system is to order and refine the society and life of its members. Every religion has a narrative specific to it, symbolism, and a system of beliefs. The religious performance includes prayers, practise of rituals, meditation, music and art forms that bring out the beliefs and ideas that the religion stresses on. The religious beliefs are often interlinked with the society it takes shapes in and its politics. It focuses on the existence of the supernatural and makes moral claims about reality. This leads to a set of rules that govern reality and life itself. Religion also encompasses ancestral or cultural traditions, writings, history, and mythology, as well as personal faith and religious experience. The term religion primarily indicates a personal experience but it has a shared character. It indicates a communal performance of rituals and a specific communal behaviour. This comes alive in communal performances of rituals and, especially for our study, Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu are fine examples of this.

The core of a religion is a set of beliefs. This belief centres on the existence, nature and appeasement of the supernatural. This supernatural may be, especially in the case of Hinduism which forms the centre of art forms like Mudiyettu, which is embodied in the nature. So the supernatural often finds a form in deity. A rock, the sky, the ocean all of this

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[24] *Islam USC-MSA Compendium of Muslim Texts*. Usc.edu. Retrieved 2010-06-04.

can become the embodiment of the supernatural. The belief also needs reinforcement. This reinforcement often gets codified in the religious texts that seek to educate the adherents. These texts are narratives of the belief system and they need performance. Various religious art forms, including Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu, are such performances. We will in this context discuss the ideas of "make believe" and "make belief", as Richard Schechner categorises them. As he points out,

> Performances mark identities, bend and remake time, adorn
>
> the body with costumes, and provide people with behaviour that
>
> is "twice-behaved", not-for-the-first time, rehearsed, cooked, prepared[25].

Further he goes on to make many a categorizations within "performance" such as "is" and "as" and "make believe" and "make belief". In "make believe" performances, the spectators are more or less aware of the fact whatever they are witnessing is not real. "Make belief" performances intentionally blur the boundary between what is constructed and what might be real. Rituals fall into this category of performance. What are relevant in the case of religion are the "make believe" performances. These performances re-enact the texts that codify the beliefs that are at the core of the particular religion and further reinforce them among the believers.

The term 'religion' has its etymological roots in Latin. It comes from the Latin religiō. The ultimate origins of religiō are not known. Some theoreticians see the possibility that the term might be a derivation from a reduplicated *le-ligare, an interpretation traced to Cicero connecting lego "read", i.e. re (again) + lego in the sense of "choose", "go over again" or

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[25] Schechner Richard, *Performance Studies Textbook* 2nd Draft, Unpublished Manuscript, July 1995.

"consider carefully". Scholars like Tom Harpur and Joseph Campbell argue that the origins are from ligare "bind, connect", probably from a prefixed re-ligare, i.e. re (again) + ligare or "to reconnect," which was made prominent by St. Augustine, following the interpretation of Lactantius. The French scholar Daniel Dubuisson notes that relying on this etymology "tends to minimize or cancel out the role of history"[26]. As he notes, Augustine gave a lengthy definition of religio that sets it quite apart from the modern word "religion" Whatever the etymological results, it is true that religion plays a major role in our lives and is a deciding factor in our interactions with the outer world.

One also needs to consider the history of the religions around the world to understand the category completely, although we may not have the space for a detailed discussion. As the Dubuisson points out, there is no "universal" history of religions, although many western philosophers tend to consider a universal history or consider religion as "transhistorical". The origin and development of religions are specific to contexts. Thus, these diverse varieties signify the multiple ways in which religion took their roots and developed in different landscapes. These differences also reflect in the performances that these religions demand.

One might want to take this point further and see the varieties in the practises that a particular religion develops in different geographical spaces. For example, the religious practises of Christians in India are different from that of those in Europe. These variations are also reflected in the performance of religious rituals. Take the performance of Ta'ziyeh itself. Ta'ziyeh is performed in India is as well but it differs from the performance in Iran. This is another point that shows that religion and the rituals that they shape are specifically modelled for the context in which it develops and the performance reflects this context specificity.

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[26] Daniel, Dubuisson. *The western construction of religion: myths, knowledge, and ideology*   (U S :The Johns Hopkins University Press 2003) 22-23

Now let us come to the specific religious contexts where the two art forms that are the focus of our discussion take place – Islam and Hinduism.

Historically, Islam found its origins in Arabia in the early 7th century. Islam literally means "submission (to God)."[27] The adherents of the Islamic faith are called Muslims. The adherents of Islam consider Qur'an as the verbatim word of the one, incomparable God (Arabic: الله, Allāh). The beliefs are also codified in the Prophet of Islam Muhammad's habits and usual practises (in Arabic called the Sunnah, demonstrated in collections of Hadith). The adherents of Islam believe that Prophet Muhammad received the final message of the god to humanity through the archangel Gabriel (Jibrīl). Thus the prophet was god's final Prophet and the Qur'an is the holy book of revelations he received over more than two decades[28]. The text of Qur'an is divided into 114 suras, or chapters. All chapters together contain 6,236 āyāt, or verses. The chronologically earlier suras, revealed at Mecca, are primarily concerned with ethical and spiritual topics. The later Medinan suras mostly discuss social and moral issues relevant to the Muslim community. The Qur'an is more concerned with moral guidance than legal instruction, and is considered the sourcebook of Islamic principles and values.

Muslim jurists consult the hadith, or the written record of Muhammad's life, to both supplement the Qur'an and assist with its interpretation. The science of Qur'anic commentary and exegesis is known as tafsir.

Prophets occupy an important position in this belief system. They are the ones selected by god and they are His messengers. Islam firmly believes in the fact that Prophets are human. It never gives them the status of god or bestows them with divinity. Instead, it believes that they are the closest to perfection of all humans and have the privilege of receiving the divine

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[27] *Islam USC-MSA Compendium of Muslim Texts*. (Usc.edu. http://www.intute.ac.uk 2010-06-04)

[28] Esposito, John L. *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford University Press 2004) 17, 18, 21

revelation. These revelations come either directly from god or through angels. Thus they are often able to perform miracles. The Qur'an names numerous figures considered Prophets in Islam, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, among others[29]. The discussion of Islam also demands a look at the idea of monotheism.

According to the theology, monotheism is the belief that only one God exists[30]. Etymologically the term "monotheism" has its origins in Greek μόνος "only" and θεός "God". The basic premise of monotheism is centred on the concept of God in the non-Hindu religions. Apart from Hindu religions include religious streams such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Druze. Monotheism also finds expression in the Platonic concept of God as enunciated by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and as the Advaita, Dvaita and Vishishtadvaita philosophies of Hinduism. This latter can be looked as an interesting subtext to the comparison and duality that we seek to establish between Islam and Hinduism. Although the latter admits the existence of a plethora of divine beings, one stream of thought within it admits the unity of divine principle. In this particular belief, Hinduism comes to the philosophical conclusion that is often articulated in Sanskrit as "Aham Brahmasmi" (meaning, one itself is god). In performance, the body takes on the spirit. We will see this particular aspect in action in the performance of Mudiyettu. In contrast, in the case of Ta'ziyeh, which is based on the monotheistic Islam, it is presumed that the body is a gift of god and one needs to offer penance to purify it and elevate it into the state of the divine. In addition, there are monotheistic religions that admit the multiplicity of forms. Christianity's belief in the trinity in which God is one being in three eternal persons (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) is an example for this. The concept of Monotheism in Islam and Judaism

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[29] http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/295507/Islam, 2010-06-05

[30]*Monotheism*, in Britannica, 15th ed. (1986), 8:266

however, is far more direct where God's oneness is unquestionable and there is no room for the plurality of God.

Monotheism is often understood in contrast to polytheistic and pantheistic religions. And further it overlaps with belief systems that profess the concept of divine unity. Monism is a fine example of this. But here one should not forget that there are several pantheistic religions that adhere to this unity. Zoroastrianism is an example of this.

The Islamic religious practises include the Five Pillars of Islam, which are the five obligatory acts of worship[31]. Islamic law (Arabic: شريعة Šarīʿah) touches on virtually every aspect of life and society, encompassing everything from banking and warfare to welfare and the environment[32].

The basis of Islam lies in the concept is tawhīd—the belief that there is only one god. The religion uses the Arabic term for God, Allāh. Most scholars are of the opinion that the term finds its origins in the contraction of the words al- (the) and ʾilāh (deity, masculine form), meaning "the god" (al-ilāh). But there are others who believe that the word had originated from the Aramaic Alāhā[33]. The first of the Five Pillars of Islam, tawhīd declares that there is no gods but God. According to the theology propounded by Islam, God is beyond all comprehension. It calls on the believers not to visualize God. They are expected to worship and adore him. The belief is that the God is the protector. God finds a description in a chapter (sura) of the Qur'an as "…God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; and there is none like unto Him."[34]

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[31] Esposito (2002), "Shari'ah".p 17.

[32] Esposito (2002), pp.111, 112,118 *Shari'ah.* Encyclopaedia (Britannica Online.http://www.britannica.com) 2010-04-22

[33] Erwin, Fahlbusch. Geoffrey William. Bromiley; *The encyclopaedia of Christianity* (B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005): Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews also refer to God as Allāh.

[34] Esposito, John L. What everyone needs to know about Islam (New York: Oxford University Press2004) 37

Islam places Qur'an at its centre. It looks at the text as the literal word of God. The word was revealed through Gabriel to the prophet on many occasions between 610 and his death on June 8, 632. The text of Qur'an was composed by the Prophet's companions (sahabah) while he was alive, although the prime method of transmission was oral. The time of the textual composition of the Qur'an is calculated as the time of Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr was the first caliph. The text was standardized under the administration of Uthman, the third caliph. From textual evidence, Islamic studies scholars find that the Qur'an of today has not changed significantly since it was standardized[35].

Within Islam there are a number of religious denominations. These denominations are similar in belief but they differ significantly in theological and legal matters. The basic division is between the Sunni and the Shiyah sects. Apart from this, Sufism is another category. It is considered a mystical variety of Islam. Most scholars do not consider it a distinct school of thought. According to the scholars, 70% of the world's Muslims belong to the Sunni sect, 15% are Shiyah. The rest make up various small minorities and Islamic sects[36].

"Shiyah" is the short form of the historic phrase Shī'atu 'Alī (شيعة علي). The phrase means "the followers of Ali" or "the faction of Ali"[37]. Shiyahs believe that the prophet's family members (the Ahl al-Bayt ["the People of the House"]) and some others among his descendants (Imams) have spiritual and political authority over the community. They further believe that Ali, who was the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, was the first and foremost of the Imams. They accord Ali with the status of the Prophet's successor. In effect, Shiyahs

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[35] Watt, William Montgomery :*The Cambridge History of Islam* p.32
   Bell, Richard, William Montgomery Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, p.51
   Peters, F. E. (1991),.3–5: "Few have failed to be convinced that … the Quran is the words of Muhammad, even dictated by him after their recitation."
[36] *Pilgrimage to Karbala - Sunni and Shiyah: The Worlds of Islam | Wide Angle*. www.worldofislam.info 16.5.2005.

[37] Safra, Jacob E. *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th Edition, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc, Vol 10, 1998. 738

reject the legitimacy of the first three caliphs. The Shiyahs quote the Prophet and they argue that Muhammad in his life time had several occasions indicated that Ali would lead the Muslims after his time. According to the belief, Ali interpreted the Sharia Law and its esoteric meanings. Ali is regarded infallible and appointed by God by divine decree (nass) to be the first Imam[38]. Ali is known as "perfect man" (al-insan al-kamil) similar to Muhammad according to Shiyah viewpoint[39].

 In the early stages the differences between Shiyahs and Sunnis were marginal. But later the Shiyah doctrine was further refined. Early Sunnis believed that the political leader of Islam should come from the Prophet's community of Quraysh. But the Zaydīs claimed that not just any descendant of 'Alī would be eligible to lead the Muslim community but only those males directly descended from Muḥammad through the union of 'Alī and Fāṭimah. But Shiyah known as imāmiyyah (followers of the Imams) asserted that a single male descendant of 'Alī and Fāṭimah was the divinely appointed Imam and the sole authority, in his time, on all matters of faith and law. Later most of Shiyah, including Twelver and Ismaili, became Imami and believed in the spiritual and political authority of Imams. As successors of the Prophet, the Imams were seen as free from error and sin and chosen by the divine power. According to the belief, Alī was the first Imam of this line and the rightful successor to Muhammad, followed by male descendants of Muhammad through his daughter Fatimah Zahra.

Hussein ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (Arabic: حسين بن علي بن أبي طالب) (3rd Sha'bān 4 AH - 10th Muharram 61 AH; 8 January 626 AD - 10 October 680 AD) is a major figure in the Shiyah belief system. He was the son of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (the final Rashidun Caliph and first Shī'a Imām) and Fātimah Zahrā (daughter of Muhammad). He is an important figure in the history of Islam as a member of the Prophet's household and one of The Fourteen Infallibles of

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[38] Nasr, Shi'ite Islam, preface, p. 10
[39] Motahhari, Perfect man, Chapter 1

Shiyah Twelvers. He is respected by the Shiyahs as a martyr and a hero who fought the tyranny of the Yazid, the Umayyad caliph. His rebellion was directed at creating a "true" Islāmic regime. But Hussein was beheaded in the Battle of Karbalā in 680 (61AH). His martyrdom is commemorated as 'Āshūrā. It is the tenth day of Muharram. However, Hussein's sacrifice gave the impetus to the establishment of a powerful Shiyah movement. This history of rebellion and the day of mourning that commemorates Hussein's martyrdom form the premise of the performance of Ta'ziyeh. Thus the ritualistic performance of the art form is closely interlinked to the religious beliefs and the power struggle and the clash of ideas within the system.

Iran is a country dominated by a Shiyah majority. 90% of the population of the country belong to the Shiyah branch of Islam. The sect is also the state religion. Only 8% of the entire population of Iran belong to the Sunni sect.

Islam has had a say in the running of Iran since the Islamic conquest of Iran circa 640 AD. But Shiyah sect took another a few hundred years to have political power in the state. The first dynasty to have a definite Shiyah influence was Idrisid dynasty (780-974) in Maghreb, a region of north-west Africa. Later, Alavids dynasty (864 - 928AD) in Mazandaran (Tabaristan) in northern Iran had a definite Shiyah influence. Fatimid Caliphate (909 AD) and the Buyid dynasty which emerged in Daylaman, in north central Iran (930 AD) also had Shiyah supremacy. They had control over central and western Iran and into Iraq until 1048 AD. But most of Iran remained sunni till the Safavids came to power[40]. But the scenario changed with the migration of the Ash'ari from Iraq to the city of Qum towards the end of the seventh century AD. This was followed by the establishment of Imamī Shī'ism in Iran.

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[40] Islam and Iran: A Historical Study of Mutual Services (www. al- islam. org/ al- tawhid/ iran/ mutual.htm) 2010-04-21

Another important development that spurred on the hegemony of Shiyah sect in Iran is the establishment of Shiyah Islam as the official state religion in 1501 by the Safavids. The monarchs ordered the Sunnis to convert, often leading to violent enforcement of the order. This led to the killing of thousands[41]. The state violence on the Sunni subjects and tribesmen prompted intervention by the Ottoman Empire. Ottomans crushed Iran but especially due to the activities of the Shiyah cleric Mullah Allamah al-Majlis, by the end of 17th century the sect had a strong hold over the masses as well as the court. The theocracy took a beating during the revolution of 1905-11. The revolution was also against the intervention of colonising efforts of the Anglo-Persian oil company. The secular rule of Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–1979 AD) followed. The west orchestrated a coup d'état in Iran in 1953. A strong backlash followed and the Iranian Revolution that led to the creation of the Islamic republic was one of the main results. After the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini called for unity between Sunni and Shiyah Muslims.

The Shiyah culture of Iran was also a rich and varied one. The Shiyah rulers of Iran gave a great impetus to science and arts. The result was a rich heritage. It produced most of the important scholars of almost all of the Islamic sects and schools of thought. Important Hadith collectors of Shiyah and Sunni (Shaikh Saduq, Shaikh Kulainy, Muhammad al-Bukhari, Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj and Hakim al-Nishaburi), expert physicians, astronomers, logicians, mathematicians, metaphysicians, philosophers and scientists (Al-Farabi and Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī), celebrated theologians (Shaykh Tusi, Al-Ghazali, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and Al-Zamakhshari), all lived and worked in Persia. Add to this the singers and propagators of Sufism like Rumi and Abdul-Qadir Gilani. The rulers nurtured poets like Hafez. The Shiyah leaders also helped and nurtured institutions like Nizamiyyas. They were the precursor to the famous universities that were to flourish later in the Islamic world and propagate knowledge

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[41] Ehasan Yarshater, *Ecyclopedia Iranica* during Safavids era

and the message of god. Al-Nizamiyya of Baghdad (established 1065) was the most famous among the Nizmiyyas. Ta'ziyeh flourishes in this richness of cultural tapestry.

While Ta'ziyeh takes its roots from the rich and varied traditions of Islam and its history, Mudiyettu abounds in the multiplicities proposed and celebrated by Hinduism.

As the predominant and indigenous religious tradition of South Asia, Hinduism is often referred to as Sanātana Dharma (a Sanskrit phrase meaning "the eternal law") by its adherents. The etymological roots of term itself points to the syncretic and inclusive core of the religion. The term Hindū comes from the Persian name for the River Indus. We first encounter the term in Persian as həndu. This corresponds to the Vedic term for the river, Sindhu. The correspondence becomes deeper as we go to the scriptures. The Rig Veda has a reference to the Indo-Aryan terrain as Sapta Sindhu (meaning the land of the seven rivers in north western South Asia, one of these rivers being the Indus). We see a correspondence to this in the Avesta, the scripture of Zoroastrianism. It refers to Hapta Həndu to denote those who lived in the subcontinent on or beyond the "Sindhu"[42]. We also see the term in Arabic where al-Hind (the Hind) refers to the same people. The term traversed a long route as it entered the subcontinent. It entered Delhi as the Sultanate established its reign. It might have travelled with the warriors who came to take over the land. Texts of this period are replete with references to this term[43]. The use of the term got a wider currency as the British adopted it to refer to the people of the subcontinent. The British used it to denote the idea of "Indian pagan" and there are evidences of this from the 17th century[44]. But the notion of Hinduism as an identifiable religious tradition qualifying as one of the world religions emerged only

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[42] See Indo-European sound laws for a discussion of the transition from "Sindhu" to "Hindu"

[43] Lorenzen, David. *Who Invented Hinduism?* (New Delhi: Steriling, 2006) 24-33

[44] Davies, J. trans. Mandelslo's Trav ,quoted in *Oxford English Dictionary*(http://www.askoxford.com) 2010-05-22

during the 19th century. Whatever the historical facts, it is safe to assume that by the end of the 18th century the word had been used as an umbrella term for most of the religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions of the sub-continent, usually excluding the religions of Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism as distinct.

Hinduism encompasses a large and varied demography. If you go by numbers, Hinduism is the world's third largest religion. It trails behind Christianity and Islam. Hinduism has approximately one billion adherents. Of this, approximately 828 million live in India[45]. Besides India, Nepal (23 million), Bangladesh (14 million) and the Indonesian island of Bali (3.3 million) have significant numbers of Hindu populations.

The religious beliefs of Hinduism are codified into a large and rich body of scriptures and texts. These texts are often divided into Śruti ("revealed") and Smriti ("remembered") texts. Most of these texts are the codification of theological discourses. Apart from that these texts are repositories of mythology and legends and sourcebooks for philosophical renderings. They also elaborate on the ways to practise dharma, meaning a pious and religious life. Vedas claim the highest authority among these texts and the Vedas are also the oldest and the most ancient among the texts. Upanishads, Purāṇas and the epics Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa closely follow the Vedas in importance and antiquity. Another text of major importance is the Bhagavad Gītā. Gita is written as a philosophical treatise delivered by Krishna and is a part of the epic Mahābhārata.

A look at the various traditions that Hinduism co-opts and one might safely say that the religion does not have a "unified system of belief encoded in declaration of faith or a

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[45] *Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents*. Adherents.com.
http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html. 10.06.2008

creed"[46]. It is better to take the term Hindu as an umbrella term that included the plurality of religious phenomena originating and based on the Vedic traditions[47].

The most striking aspect of the Hindu belief system is its comprehensive tolerance to differences in belief. This openness professed by the religion makes it difficult to define as a religion according to the traditional Western conceptions[48]. So we need to tread carefully while defining and analysing the traditions that form the core of performances like that of Mudiyettu. The religion will have a set pattern and a settled list of rituals for most of its adherents, but the wide range of traditions and ideas it allows and incorporates within itself or are covered by it makes it a difficult category to define. Hinduism is often defined as a religious tradition rather than a monolithic religion.

A rather satisfying and syncretic definition of the religion was given by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the first Vice President of India, who was also a prominent theologian. The definition states that Hinduism is not "just a faith", but in itself is related to the union of reason and intuition. Radhakrishnan explicitly states that Hinduism cannot be defined, but is only to be experienced[49]. Some other theoreticians have seen the religion as a category with "fuzzy edges", rather than as a well-defined and rigid entity[50]. It is safe to assume that the religion has a set of texts and practices that are its core but it also allows for and leaves room for a number of subtexts, regional variations, deviations based on caste and ethnic variations and encompasses occult and monotheistic streams. Some Hindus view certain rituals as

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[46] Flood, Gavin D. *An introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) 6
[47] Smith, W.C. *The Meaning and End of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962) 65
Stietencron, Heinrich von. *Hinduism: On the Proper Use of A Deceptive* Term (New Delhi: Orient Longman Private ltd, 1998) 1-22
 Halbfass, Keith. *Tradition and Reflection*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991) 1-22
 Smart, Brown. *The Formation Rather than the Origin of a Tradition.* DISKUS (*A Disembodied Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1) 1.
[48] Turner, Bryan S. *For Weber: essays on the sociology of fate* (London : Sage Publications, 1996) 275

[49]Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.   *Bhagavad Gita*, "Hinduism is not just a faith. It is the union of reason and intuition that cannot be defined but is only to be experienced."
[50] Ferro-Luzzi, *The Polythetic-Prototype Approach to Hinduism* in G.D. Sontheimer and H. Kulke (ed.) *Hinduism Reconsidered* (Delhi: Manohar, 1991) 187-95

essential for salvation, some Hindu philosophies postulate a theistic ontology of creation, of sustenance, and of destruction of the universe, yet some Hindus are atheists. Yet, despite its complexity, Hinduism is not only one of the numerically largest faiths, but is also the oldest living major tradition on earth, with its roots reaching back into prehistory[51].

One reason for this multiplicity of traditions within Hinduism might be the enormity of the geographical space from which it seeks its adherents. It developed and is spread over a large territory. This span of geographical multiplicity also reflects on the large variety and significant variations in the ethnic and cultural make up of this territory. The mainstream had to innovate to co-opt the margins of this extensive territory. And thus it evolved both by innovation from within, and by assimilation of external traditions or cults into the Hindu fold. The result is an enormous variety of religious traditions, ranging from innumerable small, unsophisticated cults to major religious movements with millions of adherents spread over the entire subcontinent. And thus we see a rich and varied body of performances within Hinduism.

One of the major points of debate about and within the Hindu social and political organisation is the caste system. The Hindu society has traditionally been categorized into four classes, called Varnas (Sanskrit: "colour, form, appearance")[52]:

1. the Brahmins: teachers and priests;

2. the Kshatriyas: warriors, nobles, and kings;

3. the Vaishyas: farmers, merchants, and businessmen; and

4. the Shudras: servants and labourers.

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[51] www. worldreligionday . org/ faith/ world- faiths/ 48- hinduism

[52] Monier,Williams. *English Sanskrit dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001)

Some historians claim that the caste system was not integral to the Vedic religion. They point out that Vedas do not discuss caste prescriptively and that they mention the Varna system sparingly. Thus the argument tries to establish that the Varna system was post-Vedic. It appears in the classical texts from the Maurya period. The Bhagavad Gītā (4.13) states that the four Varna divisions are created by God, and the Manusmriti categorizes the different castes[53]. It can be thus assumed that the Varna system was an innovation on the Vedic religion. As the Aryans came into contact with the native tribes and tribal cultures, they needed new categories to co-opt them and thus emerged the hierarchies. This is in tune with the characteristic inclusiveness of the religion. The native cultures and its legends and myths also needed to be brought into the fold and made part of the whole. It lead to the emergence of number of sub-cultures on the margins. The mainstream allowed the space where the lower castes could play out their faith related performances. The mainstream co-opted these gods and transformed them by fusing them with the mainstream gods. Art forms like Mudiyettu and their rituals are the results of such cultural exchanges and fusions. A look at the cultural roots of Mudiyettu and its later transformation will prove this point.

> The ancient performance culture of Kerala is *kavu* (sacred grove) tradition. It emerged from the animism that revered the nature. The scared groves that are the repositories of the reverence for trees, snakes and ancestors became the centre of the tradition that revered the sacred mother. In time the sacred mother was transformed, from the formless mother figure to the form of Goddess Kali[54].

Now, let us look at the dynamics of rituals.

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[53] Manu Smriti *Laws of Manu* 1.87-1.91
[54] Rajagopalan C.R, (Translated) *Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu* (Trichur, Centre For IK/Folklore Studies,2003) 19

"Rituals are a way people remember. Rituals are memories in action, encoded into actions. Rituals also help people (and animals) deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed or violate the norms of the daily life."[55]

Following Schechner's model, rituals can be divided into two kinds: The sacred and the secular. "Sacred rituals are those associated with expressing or enacting religious beliefs."[56] As defined earlier in the chapter, religious belief systems presuppose the existence of and the man's dependence on the supernatural forces. And it logically follows that the man needs to pray to and appease this supernatural. Religious beliefs often embody this supernatural in the natural. Thus often natural elements like rocks, mountains, trees, etc come to represent the supernatural. The religious rituals thus come to take the form of various activities in front of and associated with these elements. The secular rituals are those associated with various ceremonies and everyday life and activities that are not religious in character. But, as Schechner himself explains, this division is not as neat as it sounds. The secular rituals can often take on a sacred hue. For example, various rituals associated with the state can often take on a sacred nature, especially when the state tends to define itself in quasi-religious terms. Theocratic states often define their nationalism in sacred terminology. On the other hand, sacred rituals can take on forms that are decidedly worldly, especially when the sacred is defined in terms of the natural. The divisions further blur as certain practices take on both the secular and sacred character. Marriage ceremony is one of the finest examples of this. Our focus is on the sacred rituals and we would further analyse the specific nature of the sacred rituals. However, what comes out starkly is the performance aspect of all the rituals. Rituals are primarily performances directed towards specific ends.

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[55] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 24
[56] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 47

The performative aspect of the rituals comes out loud and clear in the work of French social scientist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Durkheim theorised that performing rituals created and sustained social and cultural solidarity. According to Durkheim, though these rituals may bring out religious beliefs that are often abstractions, the rituals themselves are no abstractions. On the contrary, the rituals consist of planned and studied performance of known patterns of behaviour or texts. As we will see later, the study of Tazhiya and Mudiyettu will bring out this performance of texts. As Durkheim further elaborates rituals do not bring out or narrate ideas but they embody them. As, Schechner explaines Durkheim's idea, "rituals are thought-in/as action"[57]. This is where rituals approximate theatre. In this embodiment of religious abstraction, rituals take on the qualities of theatre.

> "Not only do they employ the same processes as the real drama, but they also pursue an end of the same sort: being foreign to all utilitarian ends, they make men forget the real world and transport them to another where their imagination is more at ease; they distract. They even go as far as to have the outward appearance of a recreation: the assistants may be seen laughing and amusing themselves openly. [...] Art is not merely an external ornament with which the cult has adorned itself in order to dissimulate some of its features which may be too austere and too rude; but rather, in itself, the cult is something aesthetic."[58]

Now, this understanding of the ritual as performance will lead us as the basis of our analysis of Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu.

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[57] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York Routledge, 2002) 50
[58] Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*: (New York, Free Press, 1965) 426-27.

Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) had a greater insight into this performative aspect of rituals. His theory would take us further into the performance of rituals. Gennep's theory comes in the wake of his detailed study into the rites of passage. In his detailed analysis of the rights of passage, he came up with the three stages of "ritual action"[59]: Preliminal, Liminal and Postliminal. Every life is a passage from one stage to another and each of these stages are marked by performance of rituals. These transitions from one stage to another are everywhere. People pass from one stage of their life to another. They go through birth, puberty, marriage, parenthood, social advancement, job specialisation and death. It was left to Victor Turner to work further on these stages proposed by Gennep and come up with a more comprehensive theory about the performative aspect of the rituals and the social drama behind the rituals.

Turner works on the terms theorised on by Gennep and he zeroes in on the Liminal stage as the most crucial one. He theorises the Liminal as the phase where the performer is "between and betwixt" identities. The performer here is between what he/she was and what he/she would become. As Schechner explains,

> During the liminal phase, the actual work of rites of passage takes place. At this time, in specially marked spaces, transitions and transformations occur. The liminal phase fascinated Turner because he recognised in it a possibility for ritual to be creative, to make the way for new creations, identities and social realities by what Turner called "anti-structure"[60].

Turner explained the dynamics of this liminal space. In the first instance, the one who is going through the transition is reduced to a state of vulnerability. He/she is stripped of the previous identity while the next identity is yet to be assigned. The person is in a stage that can

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[59] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 50.
[60] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 57.

be termed "neither-this-nor-that"[61]. They are on the move. They have left one stop and are yet to reach the next. At this point, as Turner sees it, they are powerless and identityless. Also, at this stage they are inscribed with new identities, new clothes, and new meanings. The process here is context specific and there are numerous possibilities depending on the culture from which the process emanates. Schechner, talking about Turner's theory and adapting it into a purely theatrical context, draws a parallel between this and the workshop/rehearsal stage of the performance composition. At this liminal stage, the actions of the subject are imbued with symbolic significance and each of these actions is part of the process of overwriting of the identities. Turner, thus, describes the performance of the liminal figure:

> Thus liminality is frequently linked to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to wilderness or to an eclipse of the sun or moon. Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. [...] Their behaviour is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly and accept arbitrary punishment without complaining. It is as if they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition, to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new stations in life. Among themselves, neophytes tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism[62].

This liminality will come into focus as we further discuss the forms and contents of Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu in the following chapters.

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[61] Ibid.
[62] Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process*:*Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969) 95

The discussion of liminality cannot be concluded without touching upon the ideas of "anti-structure" and "communitas". In the ritual process of liminality, the liminal subjects are freed from the chores and worries of the everyday life. They are freed from the constraints and mental/social/cultural boundaries imposed by the structures of the everyday life and they feel at one with their comrades as they are freed of the social and personal boundaries of the everyday life. Turner calls this freedom from the worries of the everyday life "anti-structure" and this virtual camaraderie "communitas". As Turner explains,

> I have used the term anti-structure mainly with reference to agrarian and tribal societies, to explain liminality and what I have called communitas. I meant by it not a structural reversal, a mirror imaging of the "profane": workaday socioeconomic structure, or a fantasy rejection of structural "necessities", but a liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, violation, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles, and being acutely conscious of membership in some corporate group[63].

We would observe such communitas emerging in the process of performance of Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu.

Equally important is the space where the ritual is performed and the time of its performance. Let's call these entities "ritual space" and "ritual time". The ritual takes place in a specially allocated space. This is especially true in the case of sacred rituals. The space where Ta'ziyeh is performed is specially ordered for performance. Likewise are the spaces where the temple art forms are performed. This space and the ordering of the space have definitive impacts on the participants of the ritual. One enters this space with a lot of care and deference. For

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[63] Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York:Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) 44

example, one is required to remove one's shoes before entering the mosque or the temple. The space of the performance is made special by such ritual actions. This transforms the ordinary space to a hallowed space imbued with ritual significance. As we would see later, these symbolic actions are significant in investing the meaning within the performance.

Thus, we come to the understanding that rituals are planned and deliberate performances that turn the abstract into a discernible experience and we have come to realise their essential theatricality. Now, for the purpose of this study, we will further break down the various elements of this performance. Following the model of Schechner, there are four perspectives from which rituals can be studied and understood.

- Structure: What rituals look and sound like, how they use space, who performs them, and how they are performed.
- Functions: What rituals accomplish for groups, cultures and individuals.
- Processes: The underlying dynamics driving rituals; how rituals enact and bring about change.
- Experiences: What it is like to be "in" a ritual[64].

Each of these elements will be crucial to our analysis of Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu in the following chapters.

Rituals are primarily driven by instincts. Our everyday life is full of rituals that we perform on instinct. These instincts can be either shaped by societal norms or biologically conditioned. The rituals associated with respecting elders are a fine example of the former. In the Indian context, as I have observed during my stay in the country, we often see this ritual performed by the young, by getting up or offering a seat, etc. These are instinctual and

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[64] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 49.

shaped by societal norms. We everyday perform various rituals shaped by biological instincts. They control and redirect various emotions like aggression, sorrow and feelings of superiority/inferiority, etc. Sacred rituals often redefine this instinctual character of rituals.

Religions demand the performance of rituals, as a way of remembering and respecting the "sacred". These rituals stand out from those that we perform as part of our everyday life. Religious rituals stand out since the dogma needs to remind us of its prominence and thus it becomes a conscious and significant "performance". As Schechner points out:

> If people go through most of the secular rituals of everyday life hardly noticing that they are doing so (in daily living, it is difficult to distinguish among 'ritual', 'habit', and 'routine'), religious rituals are clearly marked. We know when we are performing them.[65]

The history of religious rituals dates back to history itself. There are many prehistoric evidences of religious rituals. The various cave sites that reveal prehistoric human life are strewn over with various artefacts that are of ritualistic significance. And all religions demands performance of religious rituals from their adherents. Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, all of them demand the performance of religious rituals. Add to this the various localised religions and sects. The Passover seders, the five daily prostrations towards Mecca of Muslims, the Roman catholic Eucharist, the waving of camphor flame at the climax of Hindu puja, the dances, the songs, etc are all religious rituals. The Hindus consulting the horoscope, the shaman, the Animist, the Pantheist, all of them are various examples of this performance.

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[65] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 45.

For a detailed study of the two art forms in focus, one might also need to study another category—the category of 'folklore'. One might begin the analysis by defining the category. As Alan Dundes points out,

> The term "folk" can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not really matter what that linking or isolating factor is - it could be a common occupation, a common language, or common religion - but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory, a group must consist of at least two persons, but obviously most groups consist of many more than that number. A member of the group may not know all the other members of that group, but he probably will know the common core of traditions belonging to it, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity. The group could be lumberjacks, railroadmen, or coal miners; or Catholics, Protestants, or Jews. The members of a country, a state or region, a city or village, a household or family, are all members of groups, and thus there is national, regional, village, and family folklore.[66]

This definition widens the scope of the category of folklore. Universities, colleges, and schools are groups, too, and they have their own traditions. There are, for example, numerous college legends, songs, pranks, and customs.

Folklore is usually considered to be "oral" or in "oral tradition." But it is not easy to fit these art forms into such neat categories. The difficulty is two-pronged. (1) not every-thing which is transmitted orally is folklore (in cultures without writing everything is transmitted orally); and (2) some forms of folklore are not, strictly speaking, transmitted orally. For example, in

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[66] Dundes, Allen. "The American Concept of Folklore", *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Special Issue: The Yugoslav-American Folklore Seminar; Indiana University Press. Dec., 1966) 226-249

the case of Ta'ziyeh, the text of the performance has been complied during the colonial times, as we will discuss in the second chapter. Rebecca Anasry Pettys studies the cycle of Ta'ziyeh using the collection made at the zenith of the performance tradition by Sir Lewis Pelly (Pelly was a representative of British Government in Iran and India). The collection was published in 1879 as *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain.* He gathered 52 scenes from oral tradition and presented 37. But can we still look at Ta'ziyeh as a folklore tradition. We will further discuss this point in this chapter. In the case of Mudiyettu, we can easily accept the definition that stresses on the orality. Mudiyettu has no written test and has always been transmitted through an oral tradition.

We would have to look at a different framework to define the category here to define the folklorist status of Ta'ziyeh. There is a stream in folklorist tradition that stresses on the life of the 'folk' rather than the orality to define the category of folklore. Richard M. Dorson is the main theorist of this stream. As he points out, the study of folklores should not be limited to the study of the oral tradition. He redefines the category to stress on 'folk life' and uses this term as the substitute for the term folklore. He argues that the art forms have as much depth as the life of the folk and that the forms cannot be studied by limiting it to the oral traditions.

There have been several attempts to arrive at a satisfactory definition of the term folklore. All these attempts and their shortcomings prove the failure to grapple with the term and the failure to blend several social science streams to define the term. John Bailey claimed that the term encompasses all that is traditional in a people. More than a science of the folk, this definition transformed the study of folklore into a study of traditions and folk songs. B A Botkin pointed out that the term encompasses all the cultural transactions through oral traditions. These definitions limited the field of enquiry. Dundan himself discusses these debates within the term:

Newell said, "By folklore is to be understood oral tradition, - information and belief handed down from generation to generation without the use of writing." He then remarked that since European oral traditions were related to traditions found among savage tribes, it was clearly necessary to extend the term folklore so as to cover the latter. So folklore was used first to include tales, beliefs, and practices now retained among the unlettered peasantry of Europe, and then secondly, in a broader sense, so as to embrace the traditional tales, customs, and usages of uncivilized races. Folklore in this second broader sense, according to Newell, was a part of anthropology and ethnography in so far as it concerned the mental side of primitive life, with special reference to folk narratives in which beliefs and habits were related or accounted for. Newell then concluded by distinguishing two sides to the subject of folklore: the aesthetic or literary, and the scientific aspect.[67]

Thus Dundan's definition, that we had earlier set out, becomes crucial for us as it widens the field of enquiry and brings in a whole new meaning to bear upon the study of the term.

Today, the study of folklore has a new direction. The aim is to recognise and understand 'togetherness' of a people. It is an attempt to define the identity of this togetherness. Although the reality is the individual, the life of an individual cannot be separated from the life of the group that he/she is part of. There is no human life outside collectivities. These collectivities can be various factors. It can be religious, caste, and various other points of identifying with one another. In this sense, Ta'ziyeh can be defined as a folklore form as it is based on the identification of a community and is based on a shared history and belief.

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[67] Dundes, Allen. "The American Concept of Folklore", *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Special Issue: The Yugoslav-American Folklore Seminar; Indiana University Press. Dec., 1966) 226-249

The study of folklore also deals with the differences and similarities between various folk art forms. We will deal with this more elaborately in the fourth chapter where we will look comparatively at both Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu.

In a collectivity, every tradition that forms part of its collective life comprise its folklore tradition. The rites of passage that is part of the various stages of the collectivities life takes the form of various folklore performances. These points will come out loud and clear in our analysis of Ta'ziyeh.

William R Bascam enunciates four functions for folklore.

1. The expression of the repressed emotions and desires of the people, and a refuge from these worries and an escape into a world of imagination: When the individual is forced to repress the dreams, they find their own outlets. In the same way, when societies have to repress the collective desires, they create a world of folklore and through this world realise those desires.

2. Folklore legitimises the civilisations in which they take shape. These rituals are rationalisations of the societies' ways of life.

3. Folklore is also a medium for education. The illiterate learn the history and culture of their society through these traditions. Unlike in urban civilisations, where there are established ways of education, these societies look to their oral traditions for educating themselves.

4. They reaffirm the existence of the society by propagating and reaffirming its values. This happens in two ways: By propagating the values and legitimising them and by

avoiding circumstances where the members of the society question the validity of the values.[68]

We will see these points in action in the cases of both Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu.

In this chapter, we have looked at religion and rituals and their performative aspect. We have seen, through Schechner, Gennup and Turner, that rituals have a clearly performative character and that this performance is imbued with symbolic significance. Now, risking the good old chicken-or-egg argument one is tempted to ask whether the modern performing arts have their origins in these religious rituals. This question has its precedent in the theories propagated by the Cambridge scholars – Gilbert Murray, Francis Cornford and Jane Ellen Harrison – who found evidences of "primal ritual" in the ancient Greek tragedies. Whatever the final judgement on this question is, one can safely assume that these religious rituals did give its participants avenues of playing out their social anxieties and ways of coming to terms with their religious and social identities.

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[68] Payyanad, Raghavan. Kerala Folklore (Kozhikode: FFM Publications, 1997)

Chapter 2

Ta'ziyeh: The History in Play

> The Ta'ziyeh of Iran is ritual theatre and derives its form and content from deep-rooted religious traditions. But although it is Islamic in appearance, it is strongly Persian, drawing vital inspiration from its special political and cultural heritage. Its genius is that it combines immediacy and flexibility with universality. Uniting rural folk art with urban, royal entertainment, it admits no barriers between the archetype and the human, the wealthy and the poor, the sophisticated and the simple, the spectator and the actor. Each participates with and enriches the other[69].

As Peter J. Chelkowski explains, Ta'ziyeh is a religious drama that has deep roots in the history and spirituality of Islam, and especially the Shiyah Islam.

Ta'ziyeh, a unique passion play practised in Iran, is an expression of Islamic culture and its struggles within. It takes place during the annual ten day period spent in mourning by the Shiyah sect, during Muharram, the first month of the Muslim lunar calendar. The performance commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. The understanding of Ta'ziyeh will not be complete without the understanding of the specific political, spiritual and social circumstances in which it took shape.

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[69] Chelkowski, Peter J. Ta'ziyeh: "Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran":*Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1* (Performing Arts Journal, Inc. Spring, 1977) 31

Figure 1 Ta'ziyeh performance

At the centre of Ta'ziyeh is the heroic tale of Hussein. The circumstances leading to Hussein's martyrdom take shape followed by the death of the Prophet (11 AH. 632 AD). The death of Muhammad sparked off a war of succession. The successor was to lead the Muslims as the political and spiritual head. The dispute rocked the still young Muslim community. The entire community was divided into two camps: One that favoured the ancient Arabic tradition of election of a successor and one that favoured succession by inheritance, through blood relation. Now, the Prophet died without a male heir. There were four main contenders for the throne: Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman and Ali. All of them were closely associated with the Prophet in one way or the other. Two of them were his fathers-in-law while the other two his sons-in-law. All of them had their chances to hold the position but the manner in which the events unfolded left the community divided. Immediately after the Prophet's demise, Abu Bakr, a trusted friend and the father of Ayesha, took over. At his death bed, Abu Bakr passed

the mantle to Umar. But after the assassination of Umar, the mantle was claimed by both Usman and Ali. This dispute also reflected the rivalry between two flourishing clans of Mecca. One section felt that Ali, as a Hashemite and the father of the Prophet's only surviving descendents, should get the leadership. For them, 'Ali, "the Hand of God," is so exalted that it is said: "Mohammed is a city of learning, 'Ali is its gate.[70]" But eventually the Usman faction carried the day and he was elected. But when Usman was assassinated in 656 the mantle fell to Ali. But this was contested by the Governor of Syria Mu'awiyah. He alleged that Ali had a hand in Usman's assassination and pressed for revenge while Ali continued to push the Hashemite back into prominence. Before the resolution of the crisis Ali was assassinated and Mu'awiyah took over as the new Caliph. Ali had two sons: Hassan and Hussein. Hassan had renounced any claims and led the way to Mu'awiyah's accession. As he approached his end, Mu'awiyah proposed his son Yazid as the new Caliph and this sparked off fresh trouble. A section of the community saw this as an effort to cut the descendents of the Prophet from the mantle and an effort to establish hereditary rule. The residents of Kufah, who had their grievances against the Syrian rule, invited Hussein to take over. Responding to the request, Hussein proceeded to Kufah with a contingent of his followers. He was stopped by Yazid's army outside the city of Kufah and was killed on plains of Karbala on the tenth day of Muharram in 680 AD. As Chelkowski quotes the renowned historian Abu Reyhan Biruni: ". . .then fire was set to their camp and the bodies were trampled by the hoofs of the horses: nobody in the history of the human kind [sic] has seen such atrocities."[71]

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[70] Chelkowski, Peter J. Ta'ziyeh: "Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran":*Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1* (Performing Arts Journal, Inc. Spring, 1977) 31
[71] Chelkowski, Peter J. Ta'ziyeh: "Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran":*Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1* (Performing Arts Journal, Inc. Spring, 1977) 32

This is the culmination of a protracted struggle within the community:

> Hussein's murder was the outcome of a protracted power struggle for control of the nascent Muslim community following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Two factions are confronted with competing views on the leadership selection process for the head of the community. Shiites advocated that the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad possessed a divine right to authority in both spiritual and temporal matters for karbala[72].

As Rebecca Ansary Pettys points out, this was a turning point in the history of Islam.

> The tragic events at Karbala provided the Shi'yahs with the perfect dramatic incident and Hussein furnished them with the perfect martyred hero. The prolonged dispute regarding the criterion for leadership of the new theocracy was the first seed of a divisive rift within Islam. The tragedy at Karbala consolidated what had been a loosely bound separatist group into a different sect with a separate and well-defined doctrine. Thus, the Shi'yah mourning ritual commemorates the birth of the Shi'yah sect. As the hero of this ritual, Hussein supplied the required attributes. Unlike his father, Ali, Hussein was not assassinated unexpectedly, but rather embarked on his fateful journey fully aware of the possible consequences. Thus, it was possible to characterize his eventual death as a willing sacrifice which not only gave his martyrdom tragic proportion, but also accorded well with the Shi'yah doctrine of free will[73].

Pettys goes on to point out the significance of the event for the Persians:

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[72] Jabber Anasori , *History of Iranian drama* (Tehran:Shikh safi Publications, 1992) 87

[73] Pettys, Rebecca Ansary. *The Ta'zieh: Ritual Enactment of Persian Renewal:* Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1981) 344

The divine right of kings, which was an established Persian tradition when the Islamic conquest toppled their Sassanid dynasty, served to color Persian response to the struggle for succession. Already favorably inclined towards Ali because of their kingship traditions and alarmed at the growing power of the Omayyuds, the Persians began to view the cause of Ali as the cause of the oppressed. Persian resentment of Arab chauvinism crystallized into a hatred directed specifically at the expand-ing authority of Omayyud leadership, and their sympathy for Ali's cause became active partisanship of his family. Shahrbanu's marriage to Hussein provided an additional link between Persian sympathy and Ali, since it united the Persian ruling line to Ali's house. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Shi'yah ritual in Persia should focus on the tragedy of Karbala or that Hussein should function as their martyr par excellence. The Persian resentment of Arab rule, the establishment of the Shi'yah sect, and the ritual mourning ceremonies are interrelated factors influencing the development and function of the Ta'zieh[74].

The movement now needed a rallying point. Hussein's only surviving son refused to take this role. Instead, there appeared the Imamate. The imamate rejected the notion of election. They had the belief that Ali was directly elected by the Prophet and that this qualification was inherited by his descendents. Each Imam, therefore, possessed superhuman qualities which raised him above the level of the rest of mankind and allowed him to guide the faithful with infallible wisdom. So Ali's followers rejected the first three Caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman). They replaced the Caliphate system by their own Imamate system. As Pettys points out, the Persians had a political point in adopting the system.

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[74] Pettys, Rebecca Ansary. *The Ta'zieh: Ritual Enactment of Persian Renewal:* Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1981) 344

The Iranian Shi'yahs believe in a chain of twelve Imams, the last of whom disappeared mysteriously and is expected to return. This unbroken chain of divinely inspired leaders has special significance for the Persians since Zain-al-abid-din (the fourth link) was also the son of Shahrbanu and, therefore, the suc-ceeding Imams carried the blood of the overthrown Persian dynasty as well as that of Muhammad[75].

Slowly the Muharram celebrations took over the public imagination in Persia and they increasingly became a public spectacle. Although the martyrdom took place in 680 AD, it took several centuries for the Muharram mourning and Ta'ziyeh to crystallise. As Pettys notes, the first public and officially sanctioned mourning rituals took place in Baghdad during Muharram in 963 AD. And by the end of this century, the performance was well established. Chelkowski quotes the reliable historian, Ibn al- Athir, who narrates the great numbers of participants, with black painted faces and dishevelled hair, circling round and round the city of Baghdad, beating their chests and moaning the mourning songs at the festival of Muharram. It was at the time when the Persian Buid dynasty ruled from Baghdad[76]. The commemoration while reliving the political and sectarian struggles of the past, also caused further rift and tensions between the Sunnis and the Shiyahs.

Although the hated Omayyud dynasty had long since been replaced by the Abbassid dynasty (also gasping its last in 963), the ritual included curses against Mu'awiyah. Normal business activities were suspended and the Shi'yah population expressed their mourning in a ritual procession which wound through the streets of the city. By 973 the Sunni population of Baghdad

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[75] Pettys, Rebecca Ansary. *The Ta'zieh: Ritual Enactment of Persian Renewal:* Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1981) 345
[76] Chelkowski, Peter J. "Ta'ziyeh: "Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran":*Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1* (Performing Arts Journal, Inc. Spring, 1977) 32

countered with a procession of their own, resulting in a bloody battle. Undaunted, the Shi'yah mourning processions continued and grew more elaborate with the passage of years[77].

The establishment of the Safavid dynasty in Iran in 1502 gave fresh momentum to the Muharram mourning. The intervening six centuries had seen the slow and steady development of the Ta'ziyeh. Shiyah sect was declared the national religion by the Safavids and thus the Persian nationalism came to be bound to the Shiyah beliefs. The Muharram observances received an impetus with the royal household lending all help and support. The monarchs saw Hussein's martyrdom as a patriotic as well as religious act. "Many accounts of the processions, written mostly by European envoys, missionaries, merchants and travellers, tell of characters dressed in colourful costumes marching, or mounted on horses and camels, depicting the events leading up to the final tragedy at Kerbela"[78]. The monarchs asked the court poets to compose elegies about the martyrdom of Hussein and the sacrifice on the plains of Karbala came to dominate the public consciousness.

These elegies had a definite effect on the already existent culture of telling the story of Hussein. The recital of these verses came to be known as Rowzeh-khani, and they became an integral part of the Muharram celebrations. Unlike the Muharram processions, the Rowzeh-khani—garden recitations—were stationary, the narrator usually seated on a raised pulpit, his audience gathered in a semi-circle beneath his feet. Through the choice of episodes and the voice modulation and dramatic presentation, the narrator was able to excite the audience and raise them to a state of intense sadness. More visual elements were added to make it more colourful to and to arouse the public imagination. Riderless horses and coffins were the new

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[77] Pettys, Rebecca Ansary. *The Ta'zieh: Ritual Enactment of Persian Renewal:* Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1981) 345

[78] Chelkowski, Peter J. "Ta'zieh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran":*Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1* (Performing Arts Journal, Inc. Spring, 1977) 33

symbols of tragedy. Such Tableau became the integral part of the ceremony. From 1704, it became a practice to use a series of tableaus to represent the events in a chronological order. The self-flagellation was further inspired by these representations. Quoting European and missionary sources, Chelkowski relives such a procession:

> Living tableaux of butchered martyrs stained with blood, their bodies showing simulated amputations, were moved along on wheeled platforms. Mock battles were mimed by hundreds of uniformed mourners armed with bows, swords and other weapons. The entire pageant was accomplished by funeral music and spectators, lined up along its path, beat their breasts and shouted "Hossein, O Hossein, the King of the Martyrs" as it passed by[79].

Some scholars have pointed out that Ta'ziyeh had its roots in the worship of ancient heroes and acts of heroism and on its way to development it may have adapted other forms that had existed earlier:

> Taziyeh can be found in the stories of pre-Islamic heroes, Rostam and Siavash. Stories which are, at heart, legends from Zoroastrian times handed down through Ferdosi's Shahnameh. Perhaps the habit of eulogizing heroes simply got transferred. Another sign of non-Islamic influence is the imagery – fantasy portraits of the Imam Hussein full-bearded but with glowing almond eyes, almost feminine – an unquestionably Persian beauty[80].

Ta'ziyeh flourished further under the Qajar dynasty, which was another strong dynasty that followed the Safavids. Around this time the two practises of recitals and the mourning processions merged to produce an actual dramatic representation of Hussein's sacrifice on the

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[79] Chelkowski, Peter J. "Ta'ziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran":*Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1* (Performing Arts Journal, Inc. Spring, 1977) 33
[80] Farhad, Nazerzadeh kermani. *Expressionism in Drama: Theory and Practice* (Tehran: Soroush press,1990) 12

plains of Karbala. Also around this time we see the reference to a permanent structure (Tekieh Khana) specifically built to house the mourning rituals from this time. This is the time when we see the passion play coming of age.

> Ta'zieh reached its fullest development under the Qajar rulers and attained its zenith during the reign of Nasir-al-din Shah. This Qajar ruler was responsible for the construction of Takiyah-i-Dawlat (the Takiyah of the State), modeled after London's Albert Hall and capable of housing three thousand spectators. This expensive structure exemplified the height of state support for the Ta'zieh performance tradition[81].

But this progress was arrested during the Pahlavi Rule. The dynasty, in its desire to secularise Iran and to push the country into the main stream, discouraged Ta'ziyeh. It was eventually banned during the Pahlavi rule. But the ritualistic base and the strong religious links and the emotional outpouring that the performance aroused in the people could not have been banished by a royal decree. This was amply proved by the fact that the symbolism and myth behind Ta'ziyeh were central to the Islamic revolution that toppled the Pahlavis.

Ta'ziyeh literally means expressions of sympathy, mourning and consolation. As a dramatic form, it has its origins in the Muharram processions commemorating Hussein's martyrdom and throughout its evolution the representation of the siege and carnage at Kerbela has remained its central point. Now, we will move on to discuss the cycle of Ta'ziyeh. Pettys studies the cycle based on a collection made at the zenith of the performance tradition by Sir Lewis Pelly (Pelly was a representative of British Government in Iran and India). The

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[81] Pettys, Rebecca Ansary. *The Ta'zieh: Ritual Enactment of Persian Renewal:* Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1981) 346

collection was published in 1879 as *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain.* He gathered 52

scenes from oral tradition and presented 37. The 37 scenes are the following:

1. Joseph and His Brothers

2. Death of Abraham, the Son of Mohammed

3. The Disobedient Son

4. The Magnanimous offer of Ali to Sacrifice his Life for a Fellow Creature

5. Death of the Prophet Mohammed

6. The Seizure of the Caliphate by Abu Bekr

7. The Death of Fatima, the Daughter of the Prophet Mohammed

8. The Martyrdom of Ali, the Son of Abu-Taleb

9. The Martyrdom of Hassan, the Son of Ali

10. The Martyrdom of Muslim, the Envoy of Hussein

11. The Murder of the Sons of Muslim

12. The Departure of Hussein from Medina on his Way to Kufah

13. The Withdrawal of Hussein from the Road to Kufah

14. The Martyrdom of Hurr

15. The Martyrdom of Abis and Shuzab in Defence of Hussein

16. A Night Assault on Hussein's Camp

17. The Death of Ali Akbar, Eldest Son of Hussein

37. The Resurrection

Pelly does not make clear why the other 15 of the dramas were omitted or what happened to them. He only says 'for even in harrowing the feelings, one must draw the line somewhere; and it has been said that a sad tale saddens double when it's long'. The very act of compiling reduces the orality of the tradition. Pelly was an eyewitness to the early performances of Ta'ziyeh and recounted the development of the art form. His complation is also comes from his experience of watching various performances. He writes in 1859: "From the palace to the bazaar there was wailing and beating of breasts and bursts of impassioned grief from scores of houses wheresoever a noble, or the merchants, or others were giving a tazia."[82]

The centre of the narrative is the martyrdom and it begins with the narrative of Jacob's loss of Joseph. Although part of a cycle, each scene can be performed as stand-alone pieces. In the first scene, taken from the ancient religious history, jealous brothers throw Joseph into the well. Here, the suffering of Joseph is compared to that of Hussein bringing the focus back to Karbala. Jacob cries, "O Lord God, although I know that no wolf has eaten my Joseph, still I am extremely moved at the sign of his foully stained coat. I wonder what will be the feelings of Fatimah, the mother of Hussein, when she sees her son's blood-stained torn coat or shirt after he shall have been put to death in a most cruel manner?" (I, 17)[83]. Karbala comes to the focus again and again. The next nine scenes are about Muhammad and his family prior to Karbala tragedy. It is about Muhammad's dilemma of choosing between his son Ibrahim and grandson Hussein. Ibrahim is sacrificed and Hussein is chosen. The scene indicates how important Hussein is to the Muslims.

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[82] Pelly, Colonel Sir Lewis, 1878, *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain*, 2 vols., WM.H. & Co, London.
[83] Pettys, Rebecca Ansary. *The Ta'zieh: Ritual Enactment of Persian Renewal:* Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1981) 347

The Prophet acknowledges the importance of Hussein. He says ""God knows that my beloved people, being my true family, my poor broken-winged birds, ought to be more pitied. I will, therefore, in order to save my people from the wrath to come, make Husain a propitiation for their sins"[84]. The last four scenes are about the deaths of Muhammad, Fatima, Ali and Hasan. The scene that represents the Prophet's death is fashioned especially to connect to Shiyah doctrine. We see Muhammad appointing Ali as his lawful successor. It is titled, according to the Shiyah sentiments, "The Seizure of the Khilafat by Abu Bakr". The following scenes lead the audience through the various events that preceded the tragedy at Karbala and end with the scene that depicts the martyrdom of Hussein. Each scene bears witness to the death of each of Hussein's supporters. Many of these supporters are depicted as the members of his family. The scenes build up the pressure and then there is the relief of the martyrdom of Kasim, the bridegroom, in the eighteenth scene. Hasan had, while drawing his last breath, requested the union of Kasim with Hussein's daughter Fatima. In the midst of the war and desperation, the contingent of Hussein celebrates the marriage. Kasim completes the formalities and goes on to the battle and death and the bride is left a widow. But as the historians suggest, Fatima was not present at Karbala. Here, we see that the history has been manipulated to serve the purpose of dramatisation. Fatima has always been an integral part of the mourning ritual. The marriage brings out the pathos as the heat of the battle and the tenderness alternates heightening the dramatic element.

The desperation and tragedy heightens in the 21st scene. Hussein is growing more and more sad as he discovers the corpses of his followers lying dead in the battle field. On the other hand, the performance brings out the actions of the enemy general Ibn Sa'd, who appoints new warrior to behead the followers of Hussein. At the end, Hussein is alone in the battlefield. He is surrounded by the dead bodies of his followers. Sa'd on the other hand has a

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[84] Ibid.

number of able warriors at his disposal. Hussein is now left with a group of weeping widows and orphans. Now, comes the final assault and in the twenty-third scene we see Hussein getting ready to brave the final assault. The attack leaves Hussein mutilated and dead. The next episodes show the sorrow of the widows left behind by the brave warriors of Hussein. Here, Pelly brings in a Christian character into the play:

> The central figure of a Christian ambassador at the court of Yazid unifies the entire scene. The ambassador, impressed by the suffering of the holy family, protests their treatment and accepts Islam prior to being executed for attempting to interfere. Two conversions are the subject of scenes thirty-five and thirty-six. In the first, a Christian lady, attracted by the fragrance and beauty of the Karbala plain, decides to break her journey and set up camp. Disturbed by the blood that gushes from the soil as the tent stakes are driven, she has a series of dreams in which she witnesses the tragedy of this plain. The revelation of Hussein's suffering converts her to Islam[85].

"The Resurrection", the final scene, portrays the resurrection of all the dead warriors and is in tune with the Islamic doctrine. Hussein is also resurrected. But Pelly's composition does not hint that Hussein will rise from the dead and thus limits the comparison with the Christian cycle. Archangel Sarafil blows the trumpet signalling the end of the world. While the Prophets of the bygone era ask for personal salvation, Muhammad asks for the salvation of the suffering people. Hussein's aid is requested and given through the narration of his story at Karbala:

> Gabriel arrives with the following message: "None has suffered the pain and afflictions which Husain has undergone. None has, like him, been obedient in

my service. As he has taken no steps save in sincerity in all that he has done, thou [Muhammad] must put the key of paradise in his hand. The privilege of making intercession for sinners is exclusively his. Husain is, by My peculiar grace, the mediator of all (II, 347)[86].

Muhammad tells his grandson, "Go thou and deliver from the flame everyone who has in his life-time shed but a single tear for thee, everyone who has in any way helped thee, everyone who has performed a pilgrimage to thy shrine, or mourned for thee, and to everyone who has written tragic verse for thee. Bear each and all with thee to Paradise" (II, 347)[87]. We come to this last section of the performance and learn the reason for its existence. Hussein justifies his sacrifice and says that his martyrdom was the only way the suffering of the people could be put to an end. He was the only one who could save the people from the wrath of god. So in a way Ta'ziyeh, while celebrating the martyrdom of Hussein, also reminds the people that they have sinned and Hussein had died for them:

This issue of pre-destination versus free will was itself magnified due to the tragedy of Karbala because of the questions which it raised in the minds of the umma. Do not forget that the people who committed the atrocities against Imam Hussein were themselves Muslims who believed in *Towhid* (worship Allah) and another life and said their prayers and made their fasts. How could they behead the person whom their own Prophet would place on his lap and kiss as a child, and not feel guilt? How could they justify having stripped naked and trampled with horses the body of the man called the "Chief of the

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[86] Pettys, Rebecca Ansary. *The Ta'zieh: Ritual Enactment of Persian Renewal:* Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1981) 350
[87] Ibid.

Youths of Heaven"? After realizing what they had done, how could they have not revolted against Yazid?"[88]

The structure of the performance of Ta'ziyeh has also evolved over the years. The space where the performance is held also changed over the centuries through which the art form grew. Tahziyeh began as street performances. From the streets it found its way to bazaars, households and palaces. Then developed the Tekieh, which became the space for the performances. Usually an open air space, Tekieh may also be constructed to accommodate large crowds and live animals as in many scenes dozens of players come on horseback and with real weapons. The monarchs and the well-to-do built Tekieh as a religious service. Some of them could accommodate thousands. The space is specially structured to help the performance.

> In contrast to the richness of the theater decoration, taziyeh stage décor and props are quite stark. All Takieh (small house and temporary for mourning) regardless of their size, are constructed as theaters in the round to intensify the dynamic between actors and audience. The spectators are literally surrounded by the action and often become physical participants in the play in enwalled Takieh. It is not unusual for combat scenes to occur behind the audience and people[89].

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[88] Khosrow, Shahriari. *Iranian Theater* (Tehran: Amir Kabir Press, 1992) 231

[89] Laleh, Taghian. *Iranian Drama* (Tehran: Markaz Publications, 2001) 56

Figure 2 Performance in, and structure of, Tekieh

The main drama occurs on a raised, curtain less platform in the center of a building or courtyard. Subplots and battles take place in a sand covered circular band of space around the stage. There are passage ways from the stage through the seating area. These serve as passageways for troops, messengers and animals. The starkness of the stage represents the barrenness of the desert plain at Karbala. The stage props are minimal and most of them are symbolic. The Euphrates River is denoted by a basin of water, a tree branch indicates a grove of palms. More utilitarian props such as chairs or bedding and cooking utensils are carried onstage by the actors themselves or even by the members of the audience. A horse without a rider denotes martyrdom.

Music also has an important part to play in the performance of Ta'ziyeh:

Singers are accompanied by a variety of drums, trumpets, flutes, and cymbals. An orchestra can be quite substantial or consist of just a few musicians depending on the financial resources or theatrical experience of the troupe. Drum music announces that the drama is about to begin. It may be repeated several times, particularly if the audience needs more time to assemble. Once the spectators have gathered, a fanfare is played while the actors and performer file into the performance area in procession[90].

Ta'ziyeh also employs a colour coding to denote the different dramatic personalities and situations. When a white cloth is put on a protagonist's shoulders or when he dons a white shirt, it is understood that the white symbolizes a shroud and he will soon sacrifice his life and be killed.

Women, in other words, did not participate as actors on the public stage. So to depict female characters such as the daughter of the prophet, Fatimih, mortal men donned the veil. On the stage, the grain of the voice and the tint of the veil determined the gender of the character in the Taziyeh performances. Young men with soft voices portrayed female characters and young girls under the age of nine (the age of maturity) performed certain minor roles. One of the early Qajar performers of women's roles, Haji Mulla Husayn from Peek Zarand-Saveh, played female characters so well that each year he had to leave

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[90] Muhammad, Reza Darvish. *Traditional Taziyeh Music in Iran* (Tehran: Mahur Publication, 2005) 12

his farm for the months of Muharram and Safar in order to perform at the Royal Takiyeh—Takiyeh Dowlat[91].

The scene of Imam Hussein's martyrdom is the saddest scene of all. It works the devotees up to a state of extreme sadness. At this point, soldiers come on stage and cover the scene. They block the audiences' vision, indicating that the sight is terrible and the people may not be able to bear it.

The Tekieh also bear witness to the community's whole hearted participation in the mourning rituals.

> Community cooperation was encouraged in the building and decoration of the *Takiyeh* whether the funds for the enterprise were provided by a wealthy, public-minded benefactor or by contributions from the citizens of a particular district. The *Takiyeh* varied in seating capacity from intimate structures able to accommodate a few dozen people to large buildings capable of holding 1000 spectators or more. Often the *Takiyeh* were temporary, erected especially for the observance of the Muharram festival. During the festival period, the *Takiyeh* were lavishly decorated with the prized personal possessions of the local community[92].

The most famous Tekieh in Iran was Tekieh Dowlat. The construction of this splendid building started in 1304. The dizzying splendor of this building had been a wonder to the

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[91] Bahram, Baizai. *Iranian Theatre* (Tehran: Roshangaran Publishing, 2001) 17

[92] Bahram, Baizai. *Iranian Theatre* (Tehran: Roshangaran Publishing, 2001) 75

visitors, many of whom attested that the building was grander than the grand opera houses of Europe. Chelkowski narrates the grand experience of visiting Tekieh Dowlat:

> I was invited to attend on the fifth day of the Ta'ziyeh. We arrived at the Tekieh toward noon. On alighting from the carriage I was surprised to see an immense circular building as large as the amphitheatre of Verona, solidly constructed of brick. Ferashes, or liveried footmen, cleared the way before us. Thrashing their staves right and left, they opened a way through the crowd that packed the great portal; and entering a dark, vaulted vestibule I groped, or rather was impelled by the throng, towards a staircase crowded with servants whose masters had already arrived. Like all stairs in Persia, these were adapted to the stride of giants[93].

The grand structure of Tekieh Dowlat represents the heights Ta'ziyeh had reached under the encouragement of Naser-ed-Din Shah, who ruled Persia from 1848 to 1896. In any case, the Tekieh was central to the performance of Ta'ziyeh. As Chelkowski points out,

> The tekieh was indeed a model of the plain of Kerbela; it was a tradition that actors in plays about the Kerbela massacre never left the central playing area as a symbol of the martyrs encircled by the enemy. It would probably not be going too far to say that the tekieh was a kind of Shi'ite omphalos[94].

It is also interesting to note that although Ta'ziyeh is performed in other countries including India, it is in Iran that it finds its fullest expression. Iran has always had a rich cultural heritage and it has been famous for its painters and poets. The rich tradition and the monarchs who encouraged the cultural and artistic endeavors must have been the causes for this.

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[93] Chelkowski, Peter J. "Ta'ziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran":*Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1* (Performing Arts Journal, Inc. Spring, 1977) 34
[94] Ibid.

In its performance, Ta'ziyeh had immense effect on the devotees. The dramatization of Hussein's martyrdom was heightened by the structure of the Tekieh and the use of apace by the performers. Chelkowsky points to the performance of the Ta'ziyeh play called "The Marriage of Kasim" as a case in point. As we have seen in the previous section, the story of Kasim is usually played between the fifth and the tenth day of Muharram as an introduction to the culmination of the martyrdom of Hussein. This part of the play, Chelkowsky points out, also acts as the dynamics of the interaction between the audience and the actors and the performers' use of the Tekieh. As the scene opens, Hussein is certain of the death of his followers and himself. Besieged by the enemies who have easily outnumbered his contingent and cut off from the waters, he knows he has no chance of survival. But even as the last moment appears, he is determined to fulfill the word given by his elder brother Hassan. The preparations for the marriage are made as Ali Akbar, the elder son of Hussein, is singlehandedly fighting off the attackers' army (the fight is not staged, but is referred to). Both the actors and the audience take part in these preparations. The preparations are being made on the central stage and in the area surrounding it. Finally they bring in the colourfully beribboned nuptial tent and lead the bride and bridegroom through one of the pit corridors to it. The entire scene is accompanied by the wedding music. The actors distribute goodies among the audience. But suddenly the jolly crowd is disturbed by the appearance of Ali Akbar's horse. It enters from behind the audience. It does not have the rider on it and we know that the brave warrior has been killed by the enemy armies. This appearance makes the actors, audience and the jolly procession come to a freeze. Kasim leaves the jolly group and proceeds to the battlefield behind the audience. And he comes back leading the procession carrying Ali Akbar's dead body. As it is the custom in Muslim countries for the entire community to participate in the last rites of the dead, the whole audience rises to its feet and weeps. According to the custom that everyone should help in carrying the dead body, the

audiences also take part in this funeral procession. Those who are at the far end will stretch their hands towards the direction to symbolically indicate their participation. As the body enters the stage, the entire audience participates in the mourning by beating their chests. As the marriage rituals continue, the audience can also hear the cries from the battle field. As Kasim completes the rituals, he is called to the battle field. He succeeds in defeating the sons of the army general. But then he is faced with the whole army and he is killed. As we notice, in the entire process the audience has a dual role: "They are both on the plains of Kerbala, symbolically representing the forces surrounding Hussein and his followers, and simultaneously in the present-day world, mourning because of the event".[95] The audience is there for the ritual catharsis and they also provide the multitudes when the story demands it. The process of watching the performance ends in the audience completely identifying with the tragedy of Karbala:

> Taziyeh, a passion play depicting the Muharram tragedy, was developed, in which the people were not passive spectators, but provided the emotional response, weeping and beating their breasts, and joining their own sorrows to the suffering of Imam Hussein. The rituals provided an important safety valve. As they moaned, slapped their foreheads, and wept uncontrollably, the audience aroused in themselves that yearning for justice, who is at the heart of piety, asking him or her why the good always seemed to suffer and evil nearly always prevailed[96].

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[95] Wilmeth, Don B. *The Kemble Era*: John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons and the London Stage by Linda Kelly (Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 1, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Mar., 1981) 132-133

[96] Hasan Sojodi , *Taziyeh in Iran*, (Tehran: Ghatreh Publications, 2006) 36

This participation of the audience is central to Ta'ziyeh, more importantly since it aims to instill in them a group identity and a sense of belonging.

> There is distinctiveness within the Taziyeh theatre that identifies it as a culturally specific art form. The Taziyeh, glorifies its religious and political figures as heroes, it allows the viewer to be drawn in as part of the performance by association. There is no free expression, there is no individual identity or room to analyse one's position within the group, the audience are trained to behave and respond in a specific way as the performers were trained, and to complete the indoctrination the group discus the performance and their response to it within the group's setting. When leaving a performance the individual feels a strong sense of identity and association with the group, there is no feeling of alienation, one does not walk the streets alone or question one's position within Iranian culture[97].

The performance of Ta'ziyeh does not alienate the viewers. Instead, it reaffirms their sense of belonging. The history that is presented is that of their ancestors, it is presented as their history and the performance itself demands their participation as players. And at the end the entire audience is united in communal grieving and they go away as one. The ritual of watching and being a part of a Ta'ziyeh performance also includes a discussion of the performance. After the performance the audience, as they disperse, discuss the performance, the actors, how good or bad they were etc. Thus the performance continues to live in their minds.

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[97] http://libragallery.blogspot.com/2008/04/performance-art-artist-identity-feb.html ; 2010-04-30

Another interesting fact about the performance of Ta'ziyeh is its complete lack of realism in costumes. Add to this the ambiguity about the historical validity of the events narrated in the performance. As is pointed out,

> Although there is strict control over the storyline and dialogue, costuming has become superfluous, it is not uncommon to see performers waving their swords as fine examples of heroes from Iran's ancient past, but dressed in local police costumes or modern battle fatigues. Although the historical references may be poor the large performances are always dramatic. It is from these performances that young Iranians learn of their cultural heritage, and begin to identify themselves with their Islamic tradition[98].

Chelkowski also points to this fact:

> Costumes are also meant to be representational. Although fabulously elegant stage attire was common at the Royal Ta'ziyeh and *Takiyeh dowlat* (government) there was no attempt to make the actors' garments historically accurate. The main goal of costume design was to help the spectators identify a character and his nature by his clothing. This practice has continued over time with certain characters adopting the prevailing fashions of the day for their particular roles[99].

Likewise makeup is also minimal in Ta'ziyeh as from the distance audience can barely see the faces of the actors clearly. But one of the most important rules is that the faces of Imam

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[98] http://libragallery.blogspot.com/2008/04/performance-art-artist-identity-feb.html; 2010-04-30

[99] Chelkowski, Peter J. *Ta'ziyeh, the Total Drama* (USA: New York University press, ,1979) 98

Hussein and his family are never shown. It is *Haraam* (forbidden) and not recommended to impersonate the Prophet and Imams. But others outside the family and evil characters have clear made-up faces.

Figure 3 Actors in action during a Ta'ziyeh performance

Like the props, the colours of characters' costumes are highly emblematic. The protagonists, or the sympathetic characters, are dressed in black, deep green and white. If they are wearing them, their turbans or shawls are also likely to be green. The antagonists, or the unsympathetic characters, are in red or orange or else colors in the red range such as brown. The antagonists also tend to wear dazzling ornaments and jewellery.

Rather than the realism in costumes or the historical validity, the end of Ta'ziyeh is pedagogic. The art form aims to educate the masses about their heritage and inheritance. It works as propaganda for religious, spiritual and nationalistic concepts. And this is exactly the reason why Ta'ziyeh finds official support and patronage. Also, one should not forget the

aspect of spectacle involved in the performance. Look at this description of the experience of watching a Ta'ziyeh performance:

> Often the Taziyeh is performed on a much larger scale. As a child I attended a performance held within a circus style tent, which sat several hundred people around the central stage area. In the past, performances have involved literally a cast of thousands, as has been recorded by Drouville in the 1860's. Drouville 'could not fathom how the realistic and chaotic battle of four thousand performers left no one hurt and wounded'[100].

It should be noted that the performance of Ta'ziyeh had always remained a completely male domain. The religious restrictions have kept female actors at bay and the acting of Ta'ziyeh remained essentially an all-male profession. Even from 1938, when a new attitude towards modernism emerged in Iran and women were able to join theatre troupes and play regularly in theatre, Ta'ziyeh has still remained exclusively a male domain. Consequently women have never appeared on the Ta'ziyeh stage. The male actors representing female characters come to the stage covering the lower part of their faces and below with a black veil. The veil hangs loose down to the waist. Heads are also covered with a black shawl wrapped tightly above the eyebrows. Only their eyes are visible.

> The women's characters wore long black costumes (rarely flowered), with other long scarves, which cover their hands; other shawls covered their faces in such a manner that only their eyes could be seen. If the women characters were protagonists, they were covered in the same way but in red. Girls' and boys' characters had long Arabic costumes in black color but, their faces were uncovered. The angels wore cashmere costumes with crowns. For showing

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[100] http://libragallery.blogspot.com/2008/04/performance-art-artist-identity-feb.html; 2010-04-30

their invisibility, their faces were covered with very thin cloths in white or blue flowered. […] Demons' costumes were colored and spotted. […] the women use bracelet and necklaces with part covering the breast and anklets.[101]

Ta'ziyeh performances also make extraordinary demands on the actors. The commitment is extraordinary. Look at this description quoted by Shehriari.

It is not only the non-actors who are brought onto the stage to become involved in a real experience and confront spectators with the contemporary event, but it is also the actor whose role goes beyond mere acting as he becomes engaged in an actual experience. In one of these scenes reported by Morier and described by him as 'the most extraordinary part of the whole exhibition', actors are buried in the ground for so long that in hot weather some die! In this scene, a row of decapitated dead bodies is simulated, 'each body with a head close to it', as the actors are 'buried alive', 'leaving the head out just above ground; whilst others put their heads under ground, leaving out the body. The heads and bodies were placed in such relative positions to each other, as to make it appear that they had been severed.' [102]

Ta'ziyeh has been an influential art form and has had strong impact on the various art forms in Iran through the centuries. As the predominant art form of Iran, it got adapted in various ways to suit a variety of occasions. For example, with the influence of western theatre forms, there emerged a happy and jovial variety of Ta'ziyeh. These were performed during wedding and birthday celebrations. They used happy and pleasant occasions and stories from the Shia

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[101] Mostawfi, Abdollah, 1371/1992, *Sharhe Zendaganiye Man ya Tarikhe Ejtemaii va Siasiye Dowrane Ghajar [My Life or the Social and Administrative History of the Gajar Period]*, 3 vols., 3rd Edition, Zawar, Tehran.
[102] Shahriari, Khursow. *Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers*. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.

history. The wedding of the daughter of Prophet Muhammad with Imam Ali is one example. They are also performed during the Hajis' return from Mecca, aid days of Islam calendar like *Ghorban*, the last day of Ramadan and to commemorate the birthdays of the twelve Shiyah Imams. William O. Beeman mentions this variety of Ta'ziyeh:

> Moses and the Pharaoh, and Solomon and the Queen of Sheba are happy Taiyeh and there were even 'comic' *Taziyeh* performances, such as 'The Binding of the Thumbs of the Demon' which has a masked figure playing the demon's role, whose thumbs are bound by the child, Ali, until he repents of his bad behavior. However, all of these performances eventually turn back to the events of Kerbala[103].

As Chelkowsky points out, the history of Ta'ziyeh is a fine example of the fact that the beginnings of drama are in the everyday happenings like funeral songs and remembering the dead heroes. He goes on to point out that "in the development of the theatrical art, the text is one of the last elements to be added"[104]. As for the text of Ta'ziyeh, it began as simple and uncomplicated. Gradually, it attained refinement and added several layers of exposition and ornamentation.

> During the course of the nineteenth century, they became more developed and refined as literature. They also became more secular in content as the "high" court tradition, resplendent in its external aspects, began to filter down to the rural areas, while the folk tradition, more organic and more natural, based on folk art, folk stories, popular religion and ingrained with social connotation, percolated up. Digressions or "Goriz"

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[103] William, O. Beeman. *Taziyeh Performance Conventions* (Tehran: Sahneh issue 12, 1999) 31

[104] Chelkowski, Peter J. Ta'ziyeh: "Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran":*Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1* (Performing Arts Journal, Inc. Spring, 1977) 33

were introduced to extend the scope of the Ta'ziyeh and to add variety and secular detail. These were based on episodes from Biblical or Koranic stories, and from national legend and tradition. Spectators were led to identify their own sufferings with these lesser heroes. For women especially, they served as a wound-healing agent, for the point was always made that all suffering was slight when compared to that of the victims of Kerbela[105].

As is amply evident, it was first the performance. The refinement of literature and nationalism, and the patriotic elements came much later. Chelkowsky also draws our attention to what happened to Ta'ziyeh as commercialization took its toll:

> Ta'ziyeh then became a commercial enterprise, centered not in the cities, which at that time were given to imitating western art forms, but rather in the rural areas. Troupes fought for the most lucrative places to perform and were often forced to lease them from the provincial governors. Actors collected contributions from the audience, usually interrupting the play in the middle of the most crucial episode. Rivalry among Ta'ziyeh troupes led to theft of manuscripts and shifting of actors from one troupe to another. Dissident political groups began using theatrical gatherings to further their own goals and subsequently the government imposed restrictions on the performances[106].

It is interesting to look at Ta'ziyeh in terms of the concept of Passion Play. The Passion Play by definition is a Catholic concept. It is parallel to the Easter Plays that depict the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. It has his origins in the church rituals. In the church, the Good Friday Gospel was sung in parts by a number of singers. Later, the Passion Play proper

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[105] Chelkowski, Peter J. Ta'ziyeh: "Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran":*Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1* (Performing Arts Journal, Inc. Spring, 1977) 37

[106] Chelkowski, Peter J. Ta'ziyeh: "Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran":*Performing Arts Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1* (Performing Arts Journal, Inc. Spring, 1977) 38

appeared first in Latin. Later, it was also staged in various vernacular languages. This involved the free translation of church hymns. By the fifteenth century the Passion Plays became huge productions staged in various European cities and also found its way to places like Sri Lanka.

Like the Jesus Christ, Ta'ziyeh positions Hussein as one who sacrificed his own life for the greater good of the mankind. Hussein's sacrifice and the staging of it are in a sense reminders of the mankind's sin. Hussein's martyrdom, much like Christ's, is aimed at the salvation of mankind. Hussein's words to his sister Zeinab are reminiscent of Christ's sacrifice:

> Hussein tells his sister Zainab, "The helpless people of the Prophet of God have no rock of salvation to fly to for refuge except Husain. They have no advocate with God on the Day of Judgment except Husain. The way of salvation is shut against them on ac-count of their manifold sins; and, except Husain, none can make a proper atonement or propitiation for transgression. Who could save the people of God from the wrath to come, seeing the empire of Faith has no other king, but Husain"?[107]

And the religious and redemptive features of Ta'ziyeh remain the magnetic quality for the viewers:

> The plays devoted to the tragedy at Karbala and its surrounding events form the core of the Taziyeh repertory. Although the massacre of Hussein and his followers historically took place in one day on the tenth of Muharram, the battle is divided into many different episodes performed on separate days. All element of Taziyeh did develop political and cultural themes but all

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[107] Pettys, Rebecca Ansary. *The Ta'zieh: Ritual Enactment of Persian Renewal:* Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1981) 350

performances hark back to the martyrdoms at Karbala, especially of Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad. Because Shiites revere Hussein's death as redemption and consider participation in Taziyeh, either as actors or spectators, as pious acts that would gain them intercession on the Day of Judgment, the dramas remain magnetic[108].

But is it justified to compare Ta'ziyeh to the Passion Plays in Europe? Some scholars disagree. For example, William O. Beeman writes that,

> It is a great disservice to Taziyeh to consider it a variety of theatre in Western terms. The purpose of Taziyeh performances, the dramatic conventions thus employed, and the unique configurations of techniques of symbolic representation in the Taziyeh serve to identify it as a unique Iranian performance genre which, although it bears superficial resemblances to Western theatre (especially when viewed through Western and Western-trained eyes), should not be robbed of its special status among the unique dramatic traditions of the world[109].

Now, let's look at Ta'ziyeh from the point of view of folklore theatre. As we have discussed in the previous chapter, the study of the folklore is a study of togetherness of the community. In this sense, Ta'ziyeh can be looked at as a point around which a collective identity takes place. One can first go into the roots of the art form and see that the promotion of the art form

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[108] Parviz, Shahriyaari. *Iranian drama* (Tehran; Sore Publications, 1987) 87

[109] Wilmeth, Don B. *The Kemble Era*: John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons and the London Stage by Linda Kelly (Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 1, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Mar., 1981) 132-133

itself was a well thought out political move. As has been often pointed out, the mourning ceremony itself was a serious political propaganda used by an Iranian Sultan. He wanted to establish himself as the undisputed leader of the political opposition to the existing Arab Caliphate. He also wanted to draw a parallel with the Iranian political situation under the occupation of a Sunnite/Arab power by referring to the stories relating to that event and to the oppression of the characters. The intention here is clear: To identify the Iranians allegorically with the historical characters and unite Iranians against the Arabs and their Caliphate. Though these aims could not be achieved eventually, it is clear that a serious identity politics revolved around the birth and growth of the art form. The devotees point around which they could rally. They found the tragedy at Karbala at the centre of their identity. In this sense, Ta'ziyeh emerges as the fulcrum of the community, a truly folklorist art form.

Shahriyari has in his work on Ta'ziyeh pointed out the political strings attached to the art form. As he says,

> One year later, Ibn Khathir, in his description of the second mourning ceremony in 964, reported: On the tenth of Muharram of this year [A.H.353], the Shi'a community (arrafidah) celebrated the mourning ('aza') of Hussein as they did the year before. The Shi'ites and the Sunnites fought violently among each other on this day, and property was looted. [110]

But, as Shahriyari aptly points out, it is not prudent to believe that the art form was only based on political intentions. The community had its own ends in celebrating the Martyrdom of Hussein.

> Tenth century annual mourning ceremonies, indeed, were not created overnight by the orders of an Iranian Sultan. If so, the ceremonies would not have had such a deep impact on the society. It was the fire under the ashes that

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[110] Shahriari, Khursow. *Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers.*A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.

provided two strong motivations for the ceremonies: firstly, they represented a return to ancient roots and ritual, still in the collective memory of the masses, which could not be performed for two centuries due to Arab occupation; and secondly, they indicated a social movement against the occupiers.[111]

A folklorist analysis will make it amply clear that the roots of the Ta'ziyeh tradition will go back further into the peculiarities of the Iranian society. Iran was a wounded society that had lost its identity, culture, civilisation, language, religion and history as a result of colonisation by Arab imperialism. It needed a point around which the society could be unified. It needed a point around which the traditions could be revived. The mourning ceremony emerged as the pretext for this desired revival. In tenth century Iranian society identified with this event, which was very relevant to their situation, and opened up their deepest and innermost collective unconscious to give it sudden attention after three hundred years of silence against Arab occupation and the Arab's absolute domination of all aspects of Iranians' lives. The performance of the art form was also a revolt against the Arab colonial masters. Hussein's sacrifice was appropriated by the people for their own causes. For the next twelve centuries, Iranians rallied around Ta'ziyeh and its myth.

This order and its revolutionary movement can be well understood when we remember that the descendants of the rulers who were responsible for the martyrdom of the grandson of the prophet and his family in Karbala were still in power as the Caliphs of the Islamic world, a world that included Iran. The mourning ceremonies, as a form of action against the occupiers, were largely welcomed by the public and became a regularly observed custom, in which the tragic fates of the prophet's grandson and his family on the one hand, and that

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[111] Shahriari, Khursow. *Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers*. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006

of the Iranians as an oppressed and lost nation on the other, ran parallel to each other to meet with Iranian mysticism and end up as the Shiite sects of Islam in the sixteenth century.[112]

The allegorical nature of Hussein's character adds to the folklorist nature of Ta'ziyeh. In his character, Hussein reflects all the human desires and aspirations. He has a complex and multidimensional character. He is both heroic and timid, hopeful and bewildered, sympathetic and complaining, compassionate and willful. What we see is a a real, flesh and blood figure. He confronts reality in its most brutal and cruel form. He has all the failings of a mortal. He is never given or elevated to a divine status. Even in his superior heroism and his otherworldly sacrifice, he remains a simple human being, a man who lost his family, his sons, his friends in a cause that he believed in. He does not make any claims to superior knowledge but believes strongly in his duty to free his people from the foreign yolk. This is a figure that the community can easily identify with. He is their representative. He is a figure around which a community of victims can form their togetherness. His nostalgia and anguish become reflective of their own fears. Like them, Hussein is another victim of injustice. Thus the performance Ta'ziyeh confirms his allegorical status and becomes a symbol of the folk's own resistance and struggle.

This identification does not stop with the celebration of the martyrdom. There are other characters that enunciate the fears and anxieties that enveloped the Iranian society reeling under the colonial tyranny of the Arabs. These characters and their dialogues in the performance become points on which the community sees their own worries reflected. After the massacre at Karbala, Hussein and all the male members of the family were killed. The female members had to flee. Otherwise, they will be captured and kept by the masters as

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[112] Shahriari, Khursow. *Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers.*A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006

slave women. Shahrbanu, Hussein's wife, is one of them. She had come to Madina as a slave girl now she has to return home a sad old woman. In the play, she says:

SHAHR BANU: But when at last I reached Madina's town

A whole world's sorrow seemed to weigh me down.

One cried, 'This girl a serving girl shall be!'

Another 'Nay, she was of high degree!'

The women thronged the roofs; the mosques, the men:

O mother! Me they bore to Omar then,

Who spoke a word that caused me pain untold?

'These hopeless wretches shall as slaves be sold!'

But Ali then appeared upon the scene,

And cried, 'be silent, fool and coward mean!

This gentlewoman, traitor, void of grace!

Shall not stand naked in the market-place.'

Light of mine eyes! After much treatment dire'

They gave me to Husayn [Hussein], thy noble sire,

Who did advise poor me, to spare me pain,

That after him I should not here remain.

Should I remain, enslaved, in fashion base,

I should be driven through the market-place.[113]

The issues of slavery and misery under the colonial masters were relevant to the Persian society and these words no doubt found echoes in the Persian consciousness. These points of identification are hard to miss in the performance of Ta'ziyeh and form the basis of my argument that Ta'ziyeh is a folk art form.

The death and resurrection of Hussein is another point at which the performance harks back to the primitive societal consciousness. As Shehriari points out, the representation of 'dying and rising' gods, celebrated in springtime – the moment of rebirth in the natural cycle – may be understood as an allegorical response to man's anxiety over death and his/her desire for revival and immortality. This is a quality that we see in many other deities across the world. The figure of Christ can be seen as a parallel. These appeals to the primitive mind's constant worries about the incessant cycle of life and death. These points prove beyond doubt that Ta'ziyeh has a folk element to it.

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[113] Shahriari, Khursow. *Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers*.A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006

Chapter 3

Mudiyettu: The Ritual in Play

> For understanding Indian theatre and performance and the colourful diversity and unity of India, it is important to see the folk theatre in its natural setting and their rugged landscape, their music as their passionate optimism, their dogged virility and the full busted female figures of their cave sculptures. The elements in Indian traditional performance can be seen in the Gangetic Valley culture. Its philosophy and traditional morality are mirrored in Ramlila and Krishnalila and the pageant play of Yakshagana. The opulent folk opera of Kanara land reveals the traditional temple worship and peculiar music and rituals of its people[114].

India is a country of great cultural diversity. There are fifteen major languages including English in India. It has more than seven hundred dialects, six important religions and many different castes and creeds. These differences are also reflected in the way people live and behave. Theatre is one of the major mediums which reflect the cultural life of the people and folk theatre which is indigenous in origin reflects the socio cultural life of the common masses. Folk theatre although it has a kind of universality which the classical forms lack, has specificities of time and space. Being a country of many different castes and creeds, these cultural performances mirror the variety and multiplicity of the nation, and the unity within this multiplicity. The traditional performances of India do not indicate the slice of the nation's life, but it offers a panorama of its existence. Indian performances represent the people in their natural habitat with all their contradiction and multifarious activities. It gives a

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[114] Gargi, Balwant. *Folk Theatre of India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966) 6

glimpse of their style of speech, music, dance, dress, behaviour, humour, proverbs, wit and wisdom.

In this chapter, we will discuss Mudiyettu, one of the most important ritualistic folk performances still prevalent in rural Kerala. And we will see how the performance of this art form combines ritual, religion and theatre to create an experience of complete audience participation.

Mudiyettu, the ancient temple art form of Kerala, has its roots in the religious myth that symbolises the victory of the divine over the evil. The root of the word is in the Malayalam (the language of Kerala) terms '*mudi*' and '*ettu*', which respectively mean 'hair' and 'wear'. The occasion is symbolically the beginning of Kali's journey to slay the *asura* king Darika. The performance is steeped in the Kerala village traditions and the rituals to appease the mother goddess. Mudiyettu has to be understood based on these myths and traditions.

Figure 4 Mudiyettu performance

As G Bhargavan Pillai points out in his seminal work on the cultural performances of Kerala, the village or *gramam* is the basic geographical unit in terms of human habitation. Nature marks out each of these villages as independent entities. These villages are self-contained and self-reliant entities with their own village economies, social fabric, and myths and temples. The mother goddess rules over these villages and the lives of their inhabitants. She is the keeper and protector. But she can also turn malevolent if provoked or ignored by the devotees. So the performances to appease the mother goddess become imperative and therapeutic to the village psyche. The roots of the villages further go back in history to *gotras* of pre-Vedic period settling in various geographic spaces as cultivators and hunters. The head of the *gotra* gets transformed into the village head and the man responsible for keeping the divinity happy. From the need to appease the gods emerged a number of festivals and performances aimed at ensuring the fertility of the land, ample rain fall, etc. Thus the village evolved a number of annual festivals and religious performances[115].

The village head also doubles as the head priest. A performance emerges from his movements, songs, chants and rituals during the religious festivals. This performance that nears a trance is primarily aimed at inspiring awe and devotion in the members of the community. These performances, carried out as part of the religious festivals, can be seen as the precursor to the Indian theatrical tradition. If we look at the religious traditions of India, it is not difficult to see that the cult of the mother is ubiquitous. There are several examples of this, the kali tradition of Bengal the Bhadrakali concept in Kerala are some of them.

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[115] Pillai, Bhargavan. G. *Nattarangu;Vikasavum Parinamavum* (Thiruvananthapuram: State Institute of Languages,Kerala,200) 17. The excerpts from this book were translated by Devendranath for the purpose of this research. Future references to this work will refer to the same translation.

Bhadrakali, the blood-thirsty and malevolent form of mother goddess, has few parallels across the world. The Greek goddess Diana can be seen as a comparison, but in terms of malevolence, Diana does not compare with Bhadrakali. She is seen as an angry goddess thirsty for the blood of the evil. Her representations themselves are intimidating to say the least. She is as patient as mother earth but, if provoked, she is malevolent par excellence. She is famous for her death dance. There is a vigorous rhythm about her movements. There is no other goddess in the religious traditions across the world that has given birth to so many art forms, literature and songs.

Figure 5 Kali's entry

The concept of Bhadrakali has its origins in the Shivite traditions of south India. The legend has it that Sati, the wife god Shiva, had committed suicide and the enraged Shiva opened his hair locks and shattered the earth with it. Sati had insisted that she wanted to take part in the

yaga, a religious ceremony that celebrates the worship of fire, being conducted by her father, the *asura* king Daksha. But Daksha humiliates her and she sacrifices herself in the *yaga* fire. The enraged Shiva opens his hair locks and throws it into the earth. From the hair locks emerged the blood-thirsty and malevolent Bhadrakali and Veerabhadra. Bhadrakali takes revenge for Sati's death and kills Dakha. The legend comes from Devi Bhagavata, one of the important Hindu mythological texts. The performance of several rituals prevalent in the temples in Kerala villages centres on this myth. Kanniyarkali in Palakkad, Thira of Kozhikode, some forms of Theyyams in Kannur, Thiyattu of Kottayam and Eranakulam, Patayani and Kolamthullal of Alappuzha and Pathanamthitta are some of the performances that relive this myth. The Dravidian origin of Shiva myth has been the subject of several scholarly debates in India. It is believed that Shiva's form has its origins in the Dravidian traditions and gods. Kerala villages are replete with temples and *Kavus* dedicated to goddess Bhadrakali. This denotes the Dravidian and tribal roots of the Shivite traditions and its flourishing in south Indian traditions. The traditions within each *gotra* nourished the myth of Kali. To win battles, to have good harvests, to cure diseases, for everything the community depended on the benediction of the mother goddess. The upper classes too depended on mother goddess and thus the figure of mother goddess becomes ubiquitous in the traditions that span the length and breadth of Kerala. In short, among these innumerable performances that celebrates the mother goddess; Mudiyettu has a special place as one which developed the

theatrical   possibilities   of   the   performance   of   rituals.

Figure 6 Performance in front of a kavu

To understand Mudiyettu, one should also understand the concept of *Kavu*, the village

temples that are connected to the concept of nature worship. *Kavu* is the place of worship for

the entire village and it is believed that it has the presence of all the elements of divinity. The

keeper of this temple is *Kavilamma*, the reigning mother goddess of the temple. The village

believed that her wrath will spell doom for the entire village and its inhabitants. Disease, war,

drought, all these are interpreted as the results of the wrath of the mother goddess. Thus the

performances to appease her become imperative. The rituals are performed before each

important event in the village and offerings are made to her. It is also important to remember

that all these rituals are symbolic of the village's togetherness. The entire village strives to

protect their habitation through rituals and religious festivals. Again, the root of this goes

back to the community living of the *gotra*s.

As Pillai points out, each *gotra* had its own cultural life, myths and stories. All of these are reflected in the religious ceremonies in the *Kavu*. Religion here becomes secondary. The primary aim is to appease the elemental nature, which takes its form in the figure of mother goddess. The religious terms and figures are often adopted from the Vedic religion. They are then adapted with the inputs from the cultural memories of the *gotra*. The community's myths and traditions transform the elements of Vedic religion. The primary aim is again the need to inspire the community to a state of devotion and awe. The rituals of these religious performances reflect the culture and history of the *gotra*. As Jerzy Grotowski points out, these elements of theatrical, ritual performances are the hallmark of human civilizations across the world.

The village head, in the next stage of the village's evolution, distributed his responsibilities related to the temple rituals among the other members of the villages. Slowly, a specific group of workers called *uralanmar* emerged around each temple. The village community was divided in terms of their functions. They, in turn, transformed the temple and its rituals. The artisans, masons, agriculturalists, village singers, all of them had specific duties to perform in the temple. They brought in their own specific aesthetic traditions to define the temple in terms of its look and performance of rituals.

The season for the performance of Mudiyettu spans from January to May[116]. But it is performed during the other months also as an offering to the temple. The fact that these performances are held at *Kavus* near fields indicates the connection of the performance with ancient fertility rituals. Nowadays, Mudiyettu is performed as a theatre form all over the country and abroad, without any regard for the season or space of traditional performance.

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[116] Rajagopalan. C.R, *Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu* (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003)22

Mudiyettu is usually performed by the members of *Kuruppu* and *Marar* communities, who are generally placed low in the hierarchy of caste structure in Kerala. Here, we also need to understand the caste dynamics in Kerala. The *varna* system gets introduced to Kerala after the migration of Brahmins into the state. After the arrival of Brahmins the social structure of Kerala gets redefined. The Brahmins redefined the already existing social fabric and introduced the aspects of the four tier caste equation. They also, in turn, appropriate the already existing ritual performances and incorporate into them the elements of Vedic religion. As we have seen in the first chapter, this ability to co-opt was one of the characteristic features of Hinduism and its evolution as the major religion in the subcontinent. The emergent Brahminic power had a major role to play in the allocation of the responsibility of performance with specific castes[117].

Kallattu, Varanattu, Keezhillam, Pazhur are the important families who have the responsibility of performing Mudiyettu in various temples[118]. There are in all nine groups who perform Mudiyettu across Kerala. Previously, various *Kavus* were allocated to specific groups or families. And there were also the tradition of a *guru*, the teacher, imparting the knowledge about the performance to a set of disciples. But these traditions have been diluted or become obsolete over the years. Also, previously, a paltry sum, a cloth and some food grains were the remuneration given to the performers. This remuneration was called *Arangupanam*. The term comes from *Arangu* (stage) and *Panam* (money) and is literally translated as the 'money for staging', revealing the theatricality of the performance.

The families and groups who traditionally perform Mudiyettu had specific space for the practice of the ritual. This space is imbued with sacred significance and it is called *Kalari* in Malayalam. Before the performance a list of sixty articles is handed over to those who

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[117] Menon, A. Sreedhara. *Social and cultural history of Kerala* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1979)

[118] Rajagopalan. C.R, *Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu* (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003)22

manage the *Kavu*. These sixty items encompass all the properties and costumes needed for the performance of Mudiyettu. A group performing the ritual includes sixteen people. Eight of these sixteen people are in charge of the accompanying music and percussions and the rest are the actual performers.

The ancient rituals associated with the performance of Mudiyettu show definite connections with the fertility rituals. In ancient times, the rituals started in the fields with the gathering of newly-bred grains. Then the festivities begin with a team of devotees circling the village. The team visits each and every house in the village and the households contribute a measure of food grains. Thus, the fertility ritual forms the cornerstone of the performance of Mudiyettu. But these elements get obliterated as the Vedic religion gets involved in the performance and transforms the performance of the rituals.

As we have seen earlier, the origin of Bhadrakali lies in the Shivite myth. She took her birth from Shiva's hair and her function was to kill Daksha, the *Asura* king and the father of Sati. She killed Daksha but her wrath did not end there. She continued her death dance, causing destruction to the universe and intimidating the people. They did not know how to appease the wrathful mother. Then, Subrahmanya, son of Shiva, came to their rescue. He drew the figure of the wrathful mother on her way. She stopped on seeing her own figure drawn in front of her and stopped to gaze with surprise at the figure and, as the legend goes, her wrath subsided[119]. Thus one of the central rituals of Mudiyettu is the drawing of the figure of mother goddess, what is called in Malayalam *Kalamezhuthu*. But the myth behind the rest of the performance is quite different.

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[119] Pillai. G. Bhargavan, *Nattarangu;Vikasavum Parinamavum* (Thiruvananthapuram: State Institute of Languages,Kerala,200) 21

The central musical element and text of the performance is called *Thottampattu*. And it refers to the myth on which the performance of Mudiyettu is centred.

In *Dwapara Yuga*, the *Asuras* and the *Devas* sparred with each other (This could be understood as the battle between the good and the evil) and the *Asuras*, the evil incarnate, were almost obliterated. Four *Asura* women escaped this mayhem: Darumathi, Danamathi, Vanika and Vamshika[120]. Two of them, Darumathi and Danamathi, prayed to Lord Brahma. And the god yielded to their wishes. The two *Asura* women gave birth two children: Danamathi gave birth to Danavendra and Darumathi gave birth to Darika. But their birth took place at an evil hour. The entire universe shuddered at the hour of their birth: the seas became violent, *Devas* in their heavenly abode shuddered and the birds and animals were seen scared and intimidated. They grew up as brave young men. As the children grew up, their mothers narrated for them the story of the destruction of the *Asuras*. The determined young men prayed to Brahma. The god granted their wishes. The wishes included that if Darika's blood is spilled thousands of *Asuras* will come alive from every drop of blood. It was also granted that no man and no weapon can kill him and that Darika will not be killed during the day or the night. The god also gave him to chants that had to be kept secret with Darika and his wife. If it is revealed to somebody else, Darika will die. Now, emboldened by the grant of his wishes, Darika commenced to defeat all the kingdoms and harassed the people. Confident that no woman can kill him, Darika humiliated the women of the defeated kingdoms. He even began to control the dawn and the dusk. He converted *Deva* women into *Asura* women. Enraged by his activities, Lord Brahma cursed Darika that he will be killed by a *Deva* woman. Narada, the bard of *Devas*, took this news to Shiva and informed him of the atrocities committed by Darika. The *Devas* sent some of the *Deva* women to kill the *Asura*.

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[120] Rajagopalan. C.R. *Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu* (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003)25

They tried to kill Darika with spears. As they stabbed him his blood spilled and a thousand *Asuras* took birth from each drop. As they failed to slay the *Asuras*, Shiva launched a campaign against the evil incarnates.

Shiva, angered by the news of the atrocities committed by the *Asura* and the insolence of Darika, combined all the divine powers and gave birth to Bhadrakali. This figure of wrathful mother goddess had sixteen hands and fearful, protruding canines. As she took birth, the mother goddess enquired about the purpose of her birth. Shiva gave her sixteen different varieties of arms and asked her to kill Darika and protect the *Devas*.

The wrathful mother began her fearful journey to the battlefield. Darika faced her off in the battlefield. Knowing that to kill Darika it is imperative that the chants given by Brahma had to be learnt, another goddess Karthyayani, disguised as a Brahmin woman, approached the wife of Darika, Manodari. Karthyayani learnt the chants and revealed them to Bhadrakali. In the battlefield, Bhadrakali killed Darika's followers. Now, afraid of an impending defeat, Darika fled the battlefield. Meanwhile, Bhadrakali controlled the movement of the sun with her tongue and created the twilight hour. As the *Asura* came out of hiding, believing that Kali had left the battlefield, the mother goddess killed him with the divine spear[121].

Kalikalpam, an ancient religious text, refers to the story as related by the sage Sudhishna to a king. *Kalikalpam* relates another interesting story. The king, on his way to hunting, stepped on a termite nest. As he disturbed the nest, spirits emerged from the nest. The king fled to the abode of the sage and asked him how the spirits acquired this power and in answer the sage related the story of Bhadrakali[122].

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[121] Story retold by Devendranath

[122] Rajagopalan. C.R. *Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu* (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 27

The ritual performance of Mudiyettu starts with the drawing of the figure of the mother goddess using various colours. Before this there is the ritual of *Kottiyirakkal*. This announces the performance to the entire village and is a characteristic feature of many of the ritual performances of Kerala. Mudiyettu centres on the transformation of the drawing of mother goddess into a divine being. The inanimate drawing is brought alive through the prayers and ritual observances carried out by the performer. This visual transformation is the crux of the performance.

Kalamezhuthu, or the drawing of the visual representation of Kali, and *Kalampattu*, a musical performance describing the mother, are central to this transformation. The drawing begins even days before the actual performance. This may even be forty days before the staging.

Another legend describes the birth of *Kalamezhuthu* and *Kalampattu* and those who perform the rituals. The enraged mother who has killed Daksha was wrecking havoc on the universe and by Shiva's orders a figure of the mother was made in the forest. Seeing her own drawing, Bhadrakali turned benevolent and named the artists *Kuruppus*. The artists held on to her feet and sang songs in her praise. Those songs came to be known as *Kalampattu*.

The drawing is made using five basic colours: red, green, black, white and yellow. And the artists believe that these five colours represent five elements of nature. The drawing is made in *Pattupura*, or the house of songs, literally. The *Pattupura* is decorated with items representing the fertility ritual. The drawing is accompanied by songs praising various deities. The colours are extracted from natural sources. This drawing, in a way, represents the nature of Kerala. The colour coordination of soft and solid colours suits the performance at night.

Black represents the night, the green the nature, the red the sacrifice, the yellow the fire and the white the richness. The drawing combines all these[123].

Figure 7 Bringing Divinity to the Kalam

The drawing begins with the use of black. Then the other colours are used to complete the picture. Breasts, nose and eyes are drawn in three dimensions. There are variations to the figure. They vary in terms of the number of hands the mother has. There are figures with four, eight or sixteen hands. It takes around three hours to complete the drawing.

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[123] Pillai. G. Bhargavan, *Nattarangu;Vikasavum Parinamavum* (Thiruvananthapuram: State Institute of Languages,Kerala,200),   26 and Rajagopalan. C.R. *Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu* (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 28

The artists might have adopted the form from the murals of Kerala temples or palaces. Some of the scholars like Chelattu Achyutha Menon even doubt that the *Kuruppans* were part of the drawing of these murals. Among the *Kalams* in Kerala, the most ancient is the *Pulluva Kalam*. The geometry of these drawings and the tools that are used in the drawing reinforce this theory [...] Mudiyettu involves only the drawing of *Bhadrakali Kalam*. The process starts in the morning. The space for drawing is marked out and the drawing begins. The rough drawing is made marking the basic figure and the artists begin to decorate the figure. The Bhadrakali figure needs the minimum of sixteen hands. Some artists draw only four hands. If they are drawing a big figure, they draw sixty-four hands and they are represented as holding sixty-four arms. [...] Usually the big figures are drawn by *Marars.*

Kuruppans and *Thiyattuunnis* draw similar kinds of *Bhadrakali Kalams.* [...] We should consider the *Kuruppans* as the experts in drawing these figures. They never use any special materials for drawing and they still follow the ancient modes of drawing the figure of the mother goddess, as Chelattu Achyuthan points out. [...] *Pulluva Kalams* lacked in beauty, though they are ancient[124].

The *Thottampattu* called *Kalampattu* is central to the conjuring up of the figure of mother goddess. *Kalampattu* describes her entire form. The songs are accompanied by a range of instruments specific to Kerala. They are *Nanduni*, *Chenda*, *Itakka* and *Ilathalam*. "The description of the entire form of Kali is central to the song sung by *Kuruppans*. The same

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[124] Pillai. G. Bhargavan, *Nattarangu;Vikasavum Parinamavum* (Thiruvananthapuram: State Institute of Languages,Kerala,200) 26-27-28

element is present in the performance of *Mudiyettu*. But the songs sung by *Kuruppans* are more beautiful and evocative."[125] Every ritual performance is a magic world of colours. The colours are accentuated by the light emanating from the sacred lamp, rhythms and songs. They inspire a heightened sense of devotion and the colours become evocative and poetic.

Now, the actual performance begins. A lamp is lighted on the stage set for the performance of Mudiyettu. The lamp is lighted from the lamp placed on the *Kalam*. The performers ask the spectators' permission before lighting the lamp. The belief is that by lighting the lamp from the lamp on *Kalam*, the soul of the mother goddess is transferred on to the stage. This is followed by *Kottiyirakku*. Next, two of the performers hold a curtain (*Thirashila* in Malayalam) covering the stage. Beyond the curtain the spectators can see the head of Shiva and the Ox, the vehicle of Shiva according to the legend, swaying to the beat. The musicians and singers stand behind the curtain. At this point, Narada comes in front of the curtain and starts informing Shiva of the atrocities committed by Darika.

A small hut near Kavu acts as the backstage for the performance. The properties for the performance are kept in this hut. First, the hut is purified using sacred water and a puja is performed to appease the goddess. This is followed by makeup. Each performer does his own makeup. Only the complicated elements like *chutti* (the small white projections on the face using a mixture of rice powder) are done with the help of the others.

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[125] Pillai. G. Bhargavan, *Nattarangu;Vikasavum Parinamavum* (Thiruvananthapuram: State Institute of Languages,Kerala,200) 28

Figure 8 Makeup in progress

Figure 9 Wearing costumes

Special pujas are done on the hair to be worn by the performer playing the part of the mother goddess. "The term Mudiyettu comes from the symbolic coronation that follows the victory. This is the meaning proposed by Dr Hermen Gundart[126]. It is wrong to assume that the term is symbolic of the beheading of Darika."[127]

Mudiyettu has all the elements common to ancient ritualistic folk performances: Stage, characters, music, instruments, involvement of the spectators and it combines all the elements of traditional Indian acting style – the performances based on voice, body movements, the variations in costumes and improvisation. Thus the performance of Mudiyettu works within the prescriptions of *Natyashsthra*, the tenants of ancient Indian acting methodology, even though it is a folk performance. From this, one may assume that the ancient Indian acting traditions had folk influences and vice versa.

Mudiyettu, as performed now, has seven main protagonists. According to Dr C R Rajagopal, in the ancient times, the performances included nine main protagonists. But that has come down to seven now. The seven protagonists include Shiva, Narada, Kali, Kooli, Darika, Danavendran and Koyinbidaran (or Koyinbida Nayar). Let's look closely at each of the characters. We will examine their makeup, costumes and performance as described by Dr CR Rajagopal.

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[126] Rev. Dr. Hermann Gundert was a German missionary and scholar, who compiled a Malayalam grammar book, Malayalabhaasha Vyakaranam (1859), the first Malayalam-English dictionary (1872), and translated the Bible into Malayalam.
[127] Rajagopalan. C.R. *Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu* (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 22. This excerpt and many others have been translated for the purpose of this research by Jayraj. K. The future references from the text will also refer to the same translation.

Figure Kali**: The face of the character is blackened with the sooth from the oil lamps and on that smallpox marks are marked using white mixture of rice powder.**

Canines are shown as prominently protruding. Face is marked with small flowers. There will be a red knot on the head. There will be ornaments on the back and the shoulders. The costumes also include garlands and girdles. She carries a sword and other arms. She uses various arms at various points of the performance. But the most important element of all is the crown. It is as tall as three and a half feet. The crown is carved out from the wood of the jackfruit tree. It is shaped as a semicircle and various legends are carved on it. It has figures like elephants, snakes and the face of Kali herself. The ears of the performer are decorated with figurines of elephants and lions. On the backside of the crown has long hair symbolically represented by coconut leaves. This crown is tied to the performer's body with specially made ropes and the performer also holds the end of this rope while performing.

As the performer enters a trance with the accompanying music, chants, the fast rhythm of the drums, bright lights and the bright lights of the lamps, Kali enters the stage sending waves of adoration and awe among the spectators.

The performer gives our grunts and growls as he enters the performance. Kali's performance has specific dancing styles and highly stylised representation of the war. The performer enters the trance at several points of the performance and the tension heightens. At these points Darika runs for his life. And Kali is made to rest and cool off. An important part of the performance is done dancing on a small sacred stool. The noise of weapons breaks through the silence of the night. Spectators stand spellbound as the mother goddess goes about killing the evil incarnate. At the summit of the performance, the entire crowd of spectators and musicians shout at the top of their voice and the performer enters a state of heightened trance. The reference here is to the legend that the sages had inspired and urged Bhadrakali to kill Darika. At the end of the performance, Kali symbolically beheads Darika and proceeds to shower her benevolence on the spectators. She blesses women and children, takes children into her lap and blesses them. At this point, the spectators can approach the performer/Kali

and share their worries and problems. The mother consoles them and gives them solutions and predicts their future and blesses them.

Kooli: Kooli is a follower of Kali and is a relief character of the performance. The makeup is comic. The face is blackened. The performer wears red clothes and the stomach and breasts are seen as comically protruding. She carries a bunch of leaves symbolising a broom. This symbolises the journey through the forest. If Kali inspires awe and devotion in the spectators, Kooli inspires the comic element and provides the much needed relief from the spellbinding terror. She runs through the crowd and makes them jump, inspiring much laughter. She takes the spectators to a heightened level of entertainment.

Figure 10 Kooli is performance

The entry of Kooli to the stage is significant. She enters the arena from a remote corner of *Kavu*. Before her entry, the rhythm of the drums and chants change. It slows down from the vigorous tempo to a light foot-tapping rhythm. The audience take up this rhythm. As she

enters, children and young men among the spectators run behind her with brooms. After this initials performance, Kooli stands before the sacred lamp and starts performing. This character is highly interactive and accessible to the audience and spectators approach the performer easily. Kooli repeats the chants revealing her identity and that she is looking for someone. She says that she is looking for her mother. She performs a range of activities to inspire the comical element. She brushes her teeth, takes bath, and cleans the courtyard, inspiring spectators to take part in the entertainment. At times she will run into the crowd of spectators, drag one or two into the stage and act as if she is breastfeeding them. All these activities border on the absurd, but she is actually opening up the minds of the spectators and purifying their minds of all the elements of selfishness and ego and binding them together into a united community. This performance and the emergence of the community signify the playfulness that underlies the unofficial folk culture.

Figure 11 Kooli in performance

After these performances, Kooli comes face to face with her mother. This is a highly emotional scene. From this point onwards Kooli accompanies all the activities of the mother. Some scholars suggest that Kooli represents the state of affairs under Darika's yolk.

Shiva: Shiva is the first character to appear on stage. The performer's bodily expressions are limited. There is no heavy makeup or costume. He covers his torso with a shawl. He stands on the sacred stool behind the curtain and holds the head of an Ox, symbolising that he is riding on the back of an Ox. The character has no dialogues. The chants are performed by the singers.

Darika and Danavendra: Their characters are categorised as *Kathi*, as in Kathakali[128]. This in itself signifies that they are evil characters. They wear red clothes and white shawls. Their costumes resemble that of the Chakyar in Sanskrit plays.[129] Both of them wear wooden crowns. The entry of the Darika is specially performed, on the stage itself. He acts behind the curtain, and gives out grunts and growls. The performance signifies the villainous element of his character. Although he is a villain, the devotional aspect of his character stands out. At various points in the performance, he disappears from the stage, hiding from the wrathful Kali.

Koyinbida Nayar: This is the only character that does not have any divine attributed. But some scholars believe that he represents Shiva. There are is no complicated makeup or costume. He is armed with a sword and shield like a warrior. He enters the stage after Kooli and Darika and his performance has no elements of stylisation in it, not even in the dialogues.

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[128] Kathakali is the most well known dance drama from the south Indian state of Kerala. The word Kathakali literally means "Story-Play". It is known for its large, elaborate makeup and costumes. The elaborate costumes of Kathakali have become the most recognised icon for Kerala.

[129] Chakyar is a Brahmin caste coming under the Ambalavasi community of Hindus in Kerala, India. They occupy a position in the Hindu Temple in managing the affairs of the temple and are assigned with the holy temple ritualistic performance called Chakyar Koothu and Koodiyattam, which is the only surviving ancient Sanskrit theatre in India.

He is represented as the chief of Kali's army and the representative of the good on the earth. His character reminds us of the *Suthradhara* of Sanskrit plays[130]. But here the difference is that he enters the middle of the performance. He reveals the context, aim and purpose of the performance to the spectators. His dialogues are earthy as he enters into a conversation with the musicians. He and his performance bring out the purely folk element in the performance. The character is a relief from the ritualistic intensity. At the same time, he is also a story teller. He relates the problems prevalent in the society including poverty and the suffering of the common masses. Thus he reveals the problems of the feudal society.

Mudiyettu does not require a separate prepared stage for performance. This feature is characteristic almost all the ritualistic folk performances in Kerala. For Mudiyettu, the entire space of the *Kavu* and the surrounding areas are the space for performance. Although the main performance is held in front of the *Kavu*, in front of the sacred lamp, as we have seen in the case of Kooli, the characters can enter this space from any corner of the temple compound. The stage also includes the space where the spectators gather, as spectators also are part of the performance. In fact, the performance converts the space of the temple into the stage by environmental acting. The trees and the greenery around transform into the properties for the performance. The natural elements used in the performance, like the coconut leaves that become Kali's hair and the broom in Kooli's hand, go hand in hand with the setting of the performance. The fields, the mangroves, the wall of the temple, everything is converted as part of the stage. As if in a magic realist narrative, the various parts of the space surrounding the temple are transformed into the various spaces mentioned in the legend of Bhadrakali.

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[130] Suthradhara literally means the "thread –holder", who is the central character in Sanskrit Theatre. Suthradhara can be equated to the stage manager, director, and producer in a modern theatre context.

The performance of Mudiyettu is not a one-dimensional one. It acquires its own dimensions in each performance. Although the performance has a text of its own, as we have seen in the discussion of the legend and myth behind the performance, the performance of the text is open to the interpretation of the performers. A new performance text emerges in each performance of the written or oral text. This basically means that Mudiyettu leaves immense room for improvisation for the performers. The appeal of the performance text depends on the capabilities of the performers. The strength of this performance text also depends on the involvement of the audience as they are an integral part of the performance. In short, in the actual performance of Mudiyettu, the authority of the actual text is minimal or nominal.

Now we come to the most important feature of Mudiyettu, the active involvement of the spectators. The spectators in a Mudiyettu performance are not inanimate as in the case of those in the modern theatre forms. They are active participants in the performers and a deciding factor in the success of the performance and its effectiveness. There are several segments in this group of spectators. There are families who have been for years involved with the temple and the rituals there. Then there are those who are active in the organisation of the rituals and the Mudiyettu performers. And then there are the devotees with deep respect for the mother goddess. These are people who are well versed in the conventions of the performance and its nuances. They know the legends and myths. They respond to the performance text with immense devotion and dedication and they become part of the performance. They are mentally ready for specific responses. For them, being part of the performance is a social as well as religious responsibility.

The performance of Mudiyettu is often the annual festival of the entire village and is often the occasion for the community to come together. Families get to come together, friends meet and all of them become part of the performance. Some are organisers; some help with getting the properties ready; some are in charge of the lamps; some help with the back stage. Thus, it

becomes a community affair and this oneness is reflected in their unified responses to the performance. This audience participation is a central element of the performance of Mudiyettu.

The day of the performance begins with special pujas in the temple at dawn. Offerings are made to the goddess. The *Kalamezhuthu* begins by the afternoon. Singers and musicians perform in the evening. The scared lamp for the performance of Mudiyettu is lighted at midnight and the performance continues till dawn. Thus, the rituals and the performance, as pointed out by Dr Rajagopal, last for twenty-four hours. The time between 9 o' clock at night to 3 o' clock in the morning is considered to be the 'hour of Bhadrakali'[131] and the actual performance happens in this time span.

Rituals and myth are an inseparable part of the performance of Mudiyettu. The performance is drained of all its meaning the moment it is taken out of the basic premises of myth and legend. The audience participation, which is an important element of the performance as we have seen, is also ensured by the elements of myth and ritual and the most important element of faith that are embedded within the performance. It is the faith that prepares and teaches the audience to respond in the way they do to the performers. As Dr Rajagopal points out, there are two stages of ritual processes within the performance of Mudiyettu: Pre-Performance and Post-Performance[132]. We have already gone through the various ritualistic aspects of the performance.

It is interesting to note that Dr Rajagopal sees three stages of ritual processes within the performance of Mudiyettu: "Separation, transformation and incorporation"[133]. And we have

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[131] Rajagopalan. C.R, *Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu* (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 41

[132] Rajagopalan. C.R, *Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu* (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 41
[133] Ibid.

noted that this tallies with the liminal stages propounded by Victor Turner. As Turner explains, the liminal beings going through the rites of passage are separated from the rest of the community and put in a state where they are identity-less and on the threshold. Then they are incorporated back into the community. We have discussed this in details in the first chapter.

During the performance, the Mudiyettu performers are separated from the rest of the community. They go into rigorous fasting etc to purify their bodies and souls to ready themselves to accept the spirit of the divine. During the performance of Mudiyettu they are transformed into the divine and at the end of the performance, after making offerings to the mother goddess, they are incorporated back into the social life of the community. Here we see the ideas of 'communitas' and 'anti-structure' in play.

> I have used the term anti-structure mainly with reference to agrarian and tribal societies, to explain liminality and what I have called communitas. I meant by it not a structural reversal, a mirror imaging of the "profane": workaday socioeconomic structure, or a fantasy rejection of structural "necessities", but a liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, violation, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles, and being acutely conscious of membership in some corporate group[134].

Now, we will take a comprehensive look at the various stages of Mudiyettu performance. As Dr Rajagopal points out, the performance is carried out in twenty-seven stages[135].

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[134] Turner Victor, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York:Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) 40
[135] Rajagopalan. C.R, *Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu* (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003)22

. Let's look at each of these stages:

1. The rituals in the morning: On the day of the performance, there will be special pujas in the temple and special offerings are mad to the mother goddess.

2. *Kottiyariyikkal*: This is the process by which the performance is announced to the entire village.

3. The special puja in the temple at noon.

4. *Kalamezhuthu*: The figure of the mother is prepared using natural colours. This is followed by *Kalampattu*.

5. The musical performance in the evening: This takes place after the puja in the evening. This again announces the performance to the villagers.

6. The taking over of the *Kalam*: The villagers who had made the offering of drawing the *Kalam* take over the *Kalam* from the artists. The artists are given money and other offerings.

7. A puja is conducted on the Kalam. A lamp is lit on the *Kalam*.

8. The divinity is brought to the *Kalam* through rituals conducted by the priests.

9. *Kalampattu*: The entire form of the mother goddess is described and praised by thesingers accompanied by drums.

10. *Thalappoli*: This is a ritual where the divinity of the mother is taken out of the *Kalam*.

11. The erasing of the Kalam: This is accompanied by drums and chants.

12. Sacrifice: The performer who is playing the role of Kali will be present at this occasion. Red coloured water is poured as a symbolic sacrifice. Although actual act of sacrifice has become obsolete, there are still temples were chicken are sacrificed.

13. Preparations in the back stage: Here also special pujas are made to appease the goddess.

14. Lighting the sacred lamp: By midnight the sacred lamp for performance (*Kalivilakku*) is lighted in front of the temple. The performers playing Kali and Darika pray in front of this lamp.

15. *Arangukeli*: This is a musical performance celebrating the space of performance. It lasts for around an hour.

16. The drawing of the curtain: This is followed by the singing of songs introducing the performance. By this time, spectators must have gathered around the temple to watch the performance.

17. The interaction between Shiva and Narada: This is where Narada informs Shiva of the misdeeds of Darika.

18. The entry of Darika: Darika enters the stage through the audience and starts performing. The performance confirms his insolence and cruelty.

19. The entry of Kali: Kali enters to the cheers of the devotees. In some temples, this is preceded by the sacrifice of chickens. In most temples, the performer comes to the space of performance without the crown and then wears the crown in front of the temple. Her performance is accompanied by performance by the musicians and chants. Kali begins to perform and achieves the trance.

20. Entry of Koyinbadi Nayar: The character interacts with the musicians and reveals the context of the performance.

21. Kooli's entry: Kooli enters providing relief and entertainment.

22. *Peshal*: This scene precedes the war and we see Darika and Danavendra engaged in an argument.

23. *Kudiyattam*: This is a highly stylised representation of the war.

24. Killing of Darika: Kali chases Darika around the temple and symbolically beheads him.

25. Interacting with children: The mother takes children into her lap and blesses them.

26. Blessing the village and the villagers: The mother blesses the village and ensures its well-being.

27. Removing the crown: In front of the village, the performer removes the crown. This also symbolises the return of Kali after the completion of the ritual.

Looking at the folk element embedded in the performance of Mudiyettu, one would see that it is part of the folklore traditions that are practised across Kerala. If one takes the entire Kerala as a group, one might able to identify one element that is central to this togetherness—the belief in the mother goddess Kali. The figure of Kali is revered and celebrated all over Kerala and it takes various forms in different parts of Kerala. The fight between the good and evil in the form of the battle between Kali and Darika is staged by these art forms. It is this togetherness that is reflected in the performance of Mudiyettu.

Mudiyettu, as we have seen, goes beyond the boundaries of traditional theatrical performances. It combines religion, ritual and theatre in a performance that awakens and unites the entire community and that, we have seen, is the strength and function of folk theatre.

Chapter 4

Actualizing the Abstract: A Comparative Study of Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu

This chapter looks at both Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu in an attempt at comparing the elements of both the ritual performances.

As we have seen, both Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu are inseparably imbedded in their contexts. These contexts are social, cultural, economical and more importantly, religious and ritualistic. They take their origins from organised, crystallised religious beliefs. So, for both these forms religious beliefs are strong driving forces. Religion, as we have seen, needs validation and reinforcement in repeated and codified performances. Here, we need to look at the two diverse sets of beliefs and religious practices that shape these two forms. While Ta'ziyeh takes its form in the monotheistic Islamic beliefs and its ancient tribal history, Mudiyettu is embedded in the multiplicity of the divine proposed by the Hindu belief system. These differences in the origin notwithstanding, the two forms show a remarkable range of similarities in performance that might take us, in the final analysis, to the universality of ritualistic folk performances.

When we say that Tazi'yeh and Mudiyettu are 'ritualistic', we reinforce the place of belief and religion in the performance of these forms. Here, let us remind of Schechner's take on ritual in performance:

> Rituals are a way people remember. Rituals are memories in action, encoded into actions. Rituals also help people (and animals) deal with difficult

transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed or violate the norms of the daily life."[136]

As we have amply demonstrated in the last two chapters, both Tazi'yeh and Mudiyettu perform the memories of specific communities. While Ta'ziyeh re-enacts the struggles within the nascent religion and reinforces the separate cultural and historical identity of the Shiyahs, Mudiyettu encodes the history and culture of *gotras*. The performance of both the forms are tightly controlled by these histories and memories and is channelized into well-defined aims of communal catharsis.

As Durkheim points out, although the thematic elements are often abstractions and ahistoric beliefs, the performance of the rituals is concrete and the performance actualises the abstract text.

> Not only do they employ the same processes as the real drama, but they also pursue an end of the same sort: being foreign to all utilitarian ends, they make men forget the real world and transport them to another where their imagination is more at ease; they distract. They even go as far as to have the outward appearance of a recreation: the assistants may be seen laughing and amusing themselves openly. [...] Art is not merely an external ornament with which the cult has adorned itself in order to dissimulate some of its features which may be too austere and too rude; but rather, in itself, the cult is something aesthetic[137].

This is the case with both Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu, though we will also see many variations within. Ta'ziyeh, as we have seen, claims to perform the historical battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Hussein. But the history is often adorned with elements that are purely aimed

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[136] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 24
[137] Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*: (New York, Free Press, 1965) 426-27

at inspiring specific emotions in the audience. The marriage of Kasim, as we have seen in the second chapter, is one such muddling of historic facts. The aim here is to inspire pity in the audience. But this element of abstraction within the text is actualised in the performance as Kasim's marriage becomes an important point of relief in the structure of performance. The scene blends to the performance and is embedded into the series of scenes that inspire sadness and anger. Here, the deviation in history is masked by the conventions of theatricality.

Mudiyettu brings out this actualisation of the abstraction more starkly. One needs to consider that the art form brings together diverse sets of legends and myths, borrowed from a variety of sources. Within each myth, there are regional variations. As we have seen in the third chapter, the legend of Bhadrakali finds different versions in the performance of Mudiyettu and in *Thottampattu*. The myths themselves transform through years of retelling and repeated performances. Koyinbidi Nayar's narrative is a fine example of this. The character enters the stage and relates the social, economical and cultural milieu. He talks about the need of the performance and goes on to relate the suffering of the people and poverty gripping the land. This may have emerged as the description of the state of the world under the tyranny of Darika but as the time passes on, the character connects the legend to the world around him and the worries of his time. So, in the current performance text what we hear is the tyranny of feudal lords and the suffering of the people under their yolk. This is a fine example of the actualisation of the abstract. The transformation of Darika into feudalism is not accidental but is shaped by history and the emergence of a separate performance text that seeks to actualise the myth in real terms.

Mudiyettu bases the performance on myths and legends that hardly have historical validity. The deities itself are a combination of various traditions rather that a historically codified figure. In Kali itself, we see several traditions merging. As we have seen in the discussion

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about Hindu traditions, continuous co-option and evolution are the hallmark of the traditions within the religion. So the text of the art form gets increasingly abstract in its terms and references. It is left to the performer to come up with a performance text that relates to the audience. Also, the various rituals that precede and succeed the performance make use of various theatrical conventions to actualise it. Let's look at some of the conventions that are played out in the performance of Mudiyettu.

Stage setting and use of light and the effective use of costumes and makeup are some of the conventional elements of modern theatre which find their full use in Mudiyettu. The entry of Kali uses the distribution light to the fullest extent. The bright torches as they reflect on the bright colours of her costume produce a psychedelic effect which converts the magic into the mundane. The audience's mind is prepared to accept and enjoy the performance as it blends into their systems of belief and everyday practices. Also, the use of makeup and costume helps in the actualisation of the performance. The entry of various characters through the audience' pace is also another effective theatrical concept that finds its use in both Mudiyettu and Ta'zhiyeh.

We will now look at the specific religious contexts of these performances and their implications on the thematic and theatrical elements of the performance.

Islam, the context and milieu of Ta'ziyeh, found its origins in the 7th century Arabia. It believes in the existence of one god and the Prophet who is the messenger of god's word. Ta'ziyeh in many ways reflects the development of the religion as an organised and structured entity and the historical process that leads to that. As we have seen in the second chapter, the art form reflects that crisis that gripped the young religion after the death of the Prophet. There were disputes within the community around the rightful successor to the Prophet and the community was divided both politically and theologically. These divisions

come to head in Hussein's sacrifice and martyrdom in the plains of Karbala. This martyrdom forms the crux of the performance of Ta'ziyeh.

Islam, as we have seen in the first chapter, means complete "submission to god"[138]. We may see this submission to the will of god reflected in the martyrdom of Hussein. We go a step further here and can say that the ideas of submission and sacrifice shape the thematic and performative elements of Ta'ziyeh. We will further analyse this point.

Mudiyettu finds its roots in the remarkably multiple traditions within the Hindu tradition. This multiplicity of traditions, as we have seen, is the result of the willingness to co-opt various divergent sects and tribal and ethnic varieties into the vedic religion. This not a one way process but rather an exchange of kinds that leave both the streams transformed. So we need to look at each and every one of these ritual performances, including Mudiyettu, as emerging from a palimpsest of sorts. There are several layers of traditions encrypted in the performance. But in the case Mudiyettu, as in many other folk performances around the world, we can identify one basic there: The struggle of good vs evil and the eventual victory of the good. Tazhiya, as we will see, will temper this theme in accordance with the religious belief where the mortal man can never approximate the god, the symbol of the ultimate good.

Mudiyettu represents a wrathful mother, created by the gods, taking revenge on the evil incarnate for the atrocities he had committed on the common people. The good vs evil theme is amplified by investing divinity in the mother and elevating her to the status of a goddess who has to be revered and appeased. The war between the good and the evil is played out in front of the audience often making them the part of the performance.

Ta'ziyeh plays out the similar theme but with variations in the plot, that is the result of the religious belief that controls and channels the performance. Here we come back to the idea of

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[138] *Islam USC-MSA Compendium of Muslim Texts*. (Usc.edu. http://www.intute.ac.uk 2010-06-04)

the submission to the almighty that is celebrated by Islam. This submission is reflected in Hussein's martyrdom and death. Yazid's generals and huge army thwart and kill Hussein's men and the performance represents each of these deaths with a sense of immense tragedy and impending doom. So, did the evil prevail over the good? Did the good get defeated by the might of the evil tyrant? The answer to this, as given by the performance itself, is a firm no. Here the belief system interferes to temper the thematic element of the performance. Hussein's martyrdom is not a failure but the way to a higher and nobler end. As Hussein himself points out at the conclusion of the performance the sacrifice is aimed at the salvation of his community from the wrath of god:

> Hussein tells his sister Zainab, "The helpless people of the Prophet of God have no rock of salvation to fly to for refuge except Husain. They have no advocate with God on the Day of Judgment except Husain. The way of salvation is shut against them on ac-count of their manifold sins; and, except Husain, none can make a proper atonement or propitiation for transgression. Who could save the people of God from the wrath to come, seeing the empire of Faith has no other king, but Husain"?[139]

While in Mudiyettu, the Kali herself is invested with divinity, in Tazhiya Hussein is made an agent of god, and instrument of his will. While Hinduism allows the deification of a tribal member in performance and allows his worship by the people in the duration and space of performance, the monotheistic rules of Islam forbade the deification of Hussein. Instead, the divine intervention transforms him into an instrument of god:

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139 Rebecca Ansary Pettys, The *Ta'zieh: Ritual Enactment of Persian Renewal:* Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1981) 351

Gabriel arrives with the following message: "None has suffered the pain and afflictions which Husain has undergone. None has, like him, been obedient in my service. As he has taken no steps save in sincerity in all that he has done, thou [Muhammad] must put the key of paradise in his hand. The privilege of making intercession for sinners is exclusively his. Husain is, by My peculiar grace, the mediator of all" (II, 347)[140].

While Mudiyettu allows room for the spectators to interact with the divinity, at this point remember the interactive sessions after the performance, where the Kali blesses the devotees, and allows catharsis through taking part in the killing of the evil incarnate, Ta'ziyeh tempers it to specific religious ends. Catharsis happens through identifying with the sacrifice of Hussein. Also, we need to remember that Islam does not allow visual representation of God or Prophet and it would be impossible, within the rules, for an actor to play this part. This is also reflected in the makeup of the actors in performance. Makeup is minimal to a point where from the distance audience can barely see the faces of the actors clearly. The faces of Imam Hussein and his family are never shown. It is *Haraam* (forbidden) and not recommended to impersonate the Prophet and Imams. But others outside the family and evil characters have clear made-up faces.

Now, we move on to the actual performance of these two forms and see where they converge and if there are huge divergences.

The performative elements of Mudiyettu is divided into eight episodes: The dialogue between Shiva and Narada, Darika's entry, Bhadrakali's enrty, Koinbida Nayar's entry, Kuli's entry, The dialogue between Kali and Darika in which Darika disappears and Kali reaches a trance,

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140 Rebecca Ansary Pettys, The *Ta'zieh: Ritual Enactment of Persian Renewal:* Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1981) 350

Mudiyetukkal which precedes the actual killing of Daruka and removal of the crown and the sacrifice. These episodes are meant to heighten the dramatic element in the performance.

After the first three episodes, the entry of Nayar changes the tenor and tone of the performance. Till this point the performance was progressing in a linear fashion and taking the audience along, often with their active participation. Nayar breaks this linearity of the narrative and takes the audience back to the present. His narrative is a kind of metaperformance, a performance about the performance. This is, as Schechner points out, a "metacommunication". "Metacommunication is a signal that tells receivers how to interpret the communication they are receiving."[141]

Nayar discusses the state of the world and the suffering poor around the country and the tyranny of the feudal lords. As we have discussed earlier, this might have originally been the discussion of the state of the world under the tyranny of Drika. Along with that, Nayar also discusses the performance that is underway. Through his interaction with the musicians, he reveals why the performance is being held, and reveals that Kali is seeking to end the tyranny of Darika. This suddenly alienates the audience from the performance and the theatricality and the 'made-up-ness' of the entire performance is revealed. One is here reminded of the alienation technique employed by Bertold Brecht. Before further explaining the Brechtian technique, let's find a parallel to it in Ta'ziyeh.

Towards the end of the Ta'ziyeh performance, we see a similar kind of metaperformance. After the resurrection of Hussein we come to the section where we learn the reason for the very existence of the performance. In this section, we hear Hussein justifying his sacrifice and he says that his martyrdom was the only way the suffering of the people could be put to an end. He was the only one who could save the people from the wrath of god. So in a way

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[141] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 92

Ta'ziyeh, while celebrating the martyrdom of Hussein, and also reminds the people that they have sinned and Hussein had died for them:

> This issue of pre-destination versus free will was itself magnified due to the tragedy of Karbala because of the questions which it raised in the minds of the umma. Do not forget that the people who committed the atrocities against Imam Hussein were themselves Muslims who believed in *Towhid* (worship Allah) and another life and said their prayers and made their fasts. How could they behead the person whom their own Prophet would place on his lap and kiss as a child, and not feel guilt? How could they justify having stripped naked and trampled with horses the body of the man called the "Chief of the Youths of Heaven"? After realizing what they had done, how could they have not revolted against Yazid?"[142]

Here again we see the linearity of the narrative. And the audience move from the cathartic phase to an alienation phase. Now, this discussion will not be complete without a discussion of Brecht's alienation technique.

Brecht's alienation technique disturbs the familiar concepts of theatricality. Till then, the plot, dialogue and the characters were designed in such a way that the audience were taken along the progression of the play. The theatricality, designed according to the conventional modes of performance, tried to hide behind the veneer of a plot. The audience were encouraged to believe in the authenticity of the plot and the characters. Brecht disturbed these notions by highlighting the theatricality. He addressed the audience and, in a sense, told them that what they were watching was a play and not life. The theatricality of the entire process was highlighted using body movements, sparse settings and by disturbing the plot. This technique

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[142] Khosrow Shahriari, Iranian Theater (Tehran: Amir kabir press, 1992) p231

was highly political and was designed to convey ideas rather that stories. The audience was asked to connect to the performance and see what their responses were to the questions raised by the performance. It was mode of disseminating ideas. The aim was, as John Willet points out,

> [To] show everything in a fresh and unfamiliar light, so that the spectator is brought to look critically even at what he has so far taken for granted [...] In fact, it is not simply the breaking of illusion (though that is one means to the end); and it does not mean "alienating" the spectator in the sense of making him hostile to the play. It is a matter of detachment, of reorientation: exactly what [Percy Bysshe] Shelley (1792-1822) meant when he wrote that poetry "makes familiar objects to be as if they were not familiar", or [Arthur] Schopenhauer (1788-1860) when he claimed that art must show "common objects of experience in a light that is at once clear and unfamiliar."[143]

Alienation effect is probably one of the most important aspects of Brecht's epic theatre. As Lellis has pointed out,

The playwright and stage director must make the event strange [and wrench] it out of a credible, naturalistic context and produce an effect of heightened theatricality whereby the audience remain constantly aware of the theatrical illusions being represented before him. The purpose of this is [..] to produce observation and criticism of the social process that the audience might take for granted.[144]

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[143] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 153

[144] Lillis, George. *Bertolt Brecht, contemporary film theory* (Ann Abor: UMI research Press, 1982)

The performance becomes a discussion of societal issues with the audience taking part in it. Brecht prompts the spectator to justify or abolish these conditions according to what class he belongs to. The technique uses a variety of means to achieve this. The means include the use of placards and verbal headings, music in contrast to the text, and the use of non realistic, geometric grouping of actors on stage.

In this alienation effect, the performer stands outside the performance to interrogate the plot disturbing the spectators out of their cathartic reverie. This is aimed at making the performance a vehicle of social change. The performance is opened to historical intervention and involvement from the part of the audience. The spectator can no longer think that he/she is just watching just a play. He/she is made aware that they are expected to think and understand. And a new category of spect-actor emerges:

> In order to understand the poetics of the oppressed one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people — "spectators," passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon — into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action. [...] This spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary he himself assumes the protagonist role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change—in short, trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution. [...] It is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which all possible paths may be examined[145].

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[145] Boal ,Augusto.*Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York:Theatre Communications Group, 1985) 122-138

This is not to say that the parallels with the folk performances can be stretched to a level to argue that they seek social change. In fact, as we will see later, these performances keep the social crisis and interrogation at bay. My attempt here is to prove that these performances do allow a space where this interrogation can safely played out. Stretching this further, one can say that this is exactly the way these performances contain social crisis.

The parallel with alienation technique is more evidently seen in the case of Mudiyettu, perhaps. In both the art forms, the break in the narration and the apparent alienation are used to ask people certain important questions. The character of Nayar talks to the audience about the suffering of the people. Take a look at his activities.

> Nayar is a relief from the ritual intensity. At the same time, he has the performance of a storyteller. He talks about the time of feudalism and relates the misdeeds of the feudal lords, poverty, the sorry state of affairs in temples and such problems[146].

> Nayar has the role of a clown. Through dialogues that border on the absurd, he engages in social criticism[147].

When he relates to the suffering of the poor under feudalism, he is actually standing outside the mythical landscape of the actual performance. He is talking about the intent of the play while also describing the content. The effect is to inspire the audience into a participation that goes beyond the mere act of devotional submission to the deity.

Shehriari finds out a very interesting parallel to Nayar in the modern performances of Ta'ziyeh.

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[146] Rajagopalan. C.R, Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 35

[147] Rajagopalan. C.R, Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 74

Secular storytelling in tea houses in Iran is still a popular profession, specifically in small cities and villages, and it seems to have been greatly influenced by these religious storytellers. These contemporary secular storytellers sometimes change their costumes according to the characters, and carry some props, such as a stick representing the sword in the play of the ancient myths. They may also suddenly stop telling the story and open themselves up to their listeners/spectators to share their feelings about the characters or even the story they are telling. In these moments they speak to their spectators directly not as a character but as a human – as themselves. In all these cases, the storytellers are in different worlds simultaneously: the actual world or in real life, as themselves, and in the characters' fictional worlds. In other words they travel between the world of the characters and themselves.[148]

As we have discussed in the previous chapter, *Taziyeh* had reached its peak in the nineteenth century. Hundreds of professional groups existed by then and each of them had their own versions of particular episodes or stories developed according to peculiar talents and creativity. But these differences shared the feature of being developed on stage on the basis of the participation of the audience. Even the characters were shaped according to the desire of the people and the representation's goal of making the people a unique body.

Now, in the case of Ta'ziyeh one should be careful while applying the parallel. The revelations made by Hussein are an indictment of his community and it inspires them into an act of self-interrogation. By celebrating the martyrdom, they are also making themselves aware of their guilt. As Shehriari explains it, "Do not forget that the people who committed

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[148] Shahriari, Khursow. *Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers*. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.

the atrocities against Imam Hussein were themselves Muslims.... How could they behead the person whom their own Prophet would place on his lap and kiss as a child, and not feel guilt?"[149] This is, as we can see, an act of self-interrogation. This self-interrogation precedes the catharsis. The guilt is expiated in the act of penance demonstrated in the Muharram procession. So, in this reading, the penance is inspired as much by the sense of guilt as it is by the sorrow at Hussein's martyrdom.

Now we come to the most important element of both these art forms: the involvement of the spectators in the performance. Here, we set out the study by first differentiating between 'audience' and 'spectators'. As Patrice Pavis points out, "The audience is not simply the sum of spectators, it does not obey the same laws as individual psychology; and this authorises our dealing separately with spectator and audience."[150] And,

> Compose of individual (and often individualist) spectators, the audience become a body thoughts and desires and of a sensitive listening that latches on to the actors. It comprises a material body that is very difficult to examine and very easy to disturb: "collective attention creates a magnetic field—if one breaks it, the theatre action becomes derisory, absurd." The presence of a single spectator can compromise this magnetic field[151].

In both Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu, we deal with this multitude of audience—spectators. It is to their collective consciousness that these art forms interact. It is this collectivity that responds to the performance.

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[149] Khosrow, Shahriari. *Iranian Theater* (Tehran: Amir Kabir Press, 1992) 231
[150] Pavis, Patrice. Tran David Williams, *Analyzing performance: theater, dance, and film*(Michigan: Michigan Press, 2003) 238

[151] Pavis, Patrice. Tran David Williams, *Analyzing performance: theater, dance, and film*(Michigan: Michigan Press, 2003) 258

First, let's look at the performance of Mudiyettu and the ways in which it seeks to involve the audience.

> The spectators of the folk theatre are not like the audience of the modern theatre. They are no aficionados. The spectators of Mudiyettu are devotees, those who make offerings and organisers. They will be readying themselves to view the spectacle days before the performance. They also have the experience of watching the performances over the years and have the knowledge of the associated rituals. They are no lifeless audience. [...] They have an active participation in the performance. They are fulfilling a social responsibility. The performance, as the yearly festival of the village, will have the presence of families and relatives[152].

The performance makes use of the performance space to heighten the participation of the spectators. Mudiyettu does not use a special stage. The entire temple is a stage. So the entire space where the spectators gather become the space of performance, reducing the distance between the performers and the spectators. The characters are positioned in such a way that they are constantly interacting with the spectators. The character of Kuli is a fine example of this strategic positioning.

Kuli can enter from any corner of the temple. The entry is announced using specific rhythms and songs. When it is announce, young men and children take up sticks and brooms and start chasing Kuli. When they approach, Kuli tells them her identity and asks them for her mother. She then goes near the women in the audience and looks for her mother among them. She even picks out some women and calls them mother. This is a point where the spectators become involved. When she realises that the mother is not among the women, the spectators

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[152] Rajagopalan. C.R, Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 40

accompanies her in her search for mother. In between, because of the comic element of her performance, people ask her several questions. She gives prompt and funny answers. There is a comic repartee in progress when suddenly she runs into the spectators following her. She picks out a man or a woman and calls him/her her son/daughter. People try to escape. This is performed like a game with the active involvement of the audience. This is an example of heightened spectator involvement. They become performers.

In another instance, Dariks tries to run into the spectators crowd to escape from Kali and Kali follows him into the crowd. But in this case, unlike in the case of Kuli, the spectators are taken over by the hatred and fear for Darika as well as the awe for Kali. In all these case, the spectators go beyond the spectatorial duties and become performers. And these are spontaneous reactions to the situations and none of this preplanned. Another performative text emerges from the interactions between the actors and the spectators.

Ta'ziyeh follows the same pattern of spectator involvement in its performance. The structure of the Tekiah and the use of the pace by the performers are important to this spectator participation, as we have pointed out in the second chapter. Peter Chelkowsky, as we discussed in the second chapter, points to the performance of the Ta'ziyeh play called "The Marriage of Kasim" as an example of heightened spectator participation. This part of the play, Chelkowsky points out, also acts as the dynamics of the interaction between the audience and the actors and the performers use of the Tekieh. Actors and the audience together make preparations for the marriage. The preparations are being made on the central stage and in the area surrounding it. During the wedding, the actors distribute goodies among the audience. The party is disturbed by the appearance of Ali Akbar's lone horse from behind the audience. Both the actor and the audience come to a standstill. Kasim proceeds to the battlefield behind the audience and comes back leading the procession carrying Ali Akbar's dead body through the audience. The whole audience rises to its feet and weeps. And since it

is a custom that everyone should help in carrying the dead body, the audience also take part in this funeral procession. Those who are at the far end will stretch their hands towards the direction to symbolically indicate their participation. As we notice, in the entire process the audience has a dual role: "They are both on the plains of Kerbala, symbolically representing the forces surrounding Hussein and his followers, and simultaneously in the present-day world, mourning because of the event." [153]

In the case of both the art forms, the performance finds its meaning in the participation of the spectators. Moreover, this participation leads to the crystallization of the social relationships in repeated performances. As Erving Goffman points out,

> A "performance" may be defined as all the activities of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. […] When an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise: defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audience or an audience of the same persons[154].

This spontaneity of ritual performances is pointed out by Victor Turner:

> Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performance. [...] A performance is a dialectic of "flow", that is, spontaneous movement in which the action and awareness are one, and

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[153] Asgar, Jalal. Review of *Taziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* by Peter J. Chelkowski (Theatre Journal, Vol. 33, No. 1, The Johns Hopkins University Press Mar, 1981) 132

[154] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 23

"reflexivity", in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen "in action," as they shape and explain behaviour. A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies[155].

This active participation of the spectators also demand improvised reactions from the actor. This leads us to the question of how much room does a ritual performance allow the performers to improvise?

Strictly speaking, performing rituals is not "acting" at all in the theatrical sense. The doer is not performing but acting. It is not acting because most rituals involve no impersonation. [...] Persons performing rituals do prescribed actions, wear designated costumes, and in other ways enact highly codified behaviours. [...] the virtuosity of the performer as a stage presence is not highly prized in itself as it is in theatre. [...] In rituals, the meaning and consequence of the ritual action as authenticated by the presence of the actual person enabled to enact the ritual are what count[156].

But the folk ritualistic performances like Mudiyettu do leave the space for improvisation:

Although Mudiyettu has a text of its own, the performers evolve a performance text in each performance. This performance text varies in each performance. The liveliness of the performance depends on the virtuosity of

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[155] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 13

[156] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 162-163

the performer and the level of involvement on the part of the spectators. All performers have the liberty of improvisation and the authority of the text is limited[157].

This shows that there is room for improvisation within the codified acting styles prescribed by rituals, at least there is in the case of Mudiyettu. This possibility is called "de-formation" by Patrice Pavis: This de-formation is not the elimination of the traditional form, but a reformation into another kind of gesture, inspired by the tradition and which prepares for the next stages of re-elaboration[158]. This de-formation does not slip into obscurity as the codes are well known to the receivers. They do not find it difficult to comprehend and enjoy the improvisation as they decode the new messages without difficulty. They have the experience of watching the performative codes over a long period of time.

> Whenever improvisation is a performative strategy in ritual, it places rituals squarely within the domain of play. It is indeed the playing, the improvising, that engages people, drawing them into the action, constructing their relationships, thereby generating multiple and simultaneous discourses always surging between harmony/disharmony, order/disorder, integration/opposition and so on[159].

The interaction between the performers and the spectators can also be seen in terms of the idea of environmental theatre. The concept of environmental theatre involves reducing the distance between the spectators and the performers. It refers to the use of space concretely and organically.

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[157] Rajagopalan. C.R, Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 40
[158] Pavis,Partice. *Dancing With Faust:A Semiotician'sReflections on Barba's Intercultural Mise-En-Scene* (TDR: The Drama Review33 no.3:1989) 39-40
[159] Drewal, Margaret Thomson. *Yoruba Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press.1992) 7-8

Environmental theatre can be defined as a performance which can only be done in a particular place or site. The physical constraints and characteristics of the site are used as part of the performance. One of the greatest dramatic opportunities of site-specific theatre is that, by staging its action in appropriate real-world settings rather than in emulations of those settings within traditional theatre spaces, it may invest its performances with greater authenticity and audience engagement[160]. A secondary definition of environmental theatre is used to describe any production that attempts to immerse the audience in the performance by bringing the action off the stage area.

Modern theatre, as Schechner points out, demands a uniform response from the audience while clearly segregating the audience from the performers. Possibly the development of a theatre as special place which can accommodate many different kinds of performance is styled to urban cultures where space is expensive and must be clearly marked out for uses[161].

But in the rural landscape where Mudiyettu takes place, these space constraints dissolve. The performers use the entire space around the temple for performance. Although the main action takes place in front of the sacred lamp lighted of the temples, the scenes of war, *kudiyattam*, and entries can take place from any corner of the temple. The stage also encompasses the audience. The performance transforms the entire temple compound into a stage and using environmental acting they create the atmosphere of an ancient nature theatre. The properties and even costumes go with this natural setting. The stage also encompasses are all the trees, shrubs, walls and fields. So the stage for Mudiyettu is an open space. Pavis's idea of this openness of the space can be read with this: Pavis deduces equations between the space and temporal settings of a performance:

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[160] Environmental Theatre. www.wikipedia.com.08-12-2009
[161] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge,2003) 58-59

Space	Time
Open	Infinite
Closed	Limited
Large/wide	Long
Small	Short
Global	Uninterrupted
Fragmentary	Interrupted
Etc	Etc

According to this equation, "open + infinite = open space, infinite time". As Pavis points out, when we have an open space for performance; it also can contain the possibility of infinite temporal setting[162]. This analysis suits the performance of Mudiyettu as the performance also takes place based on a myth that occupies a time frame that approaches the infinite.

But Ta'ziyeh presents a similar equation of space. Ta'hziyeh began as street performances. But the contemporary performances are held in a special structure called Tekieh. But this structure is also, usually, an open air space. So the equation of open space and infinite time can be applied in this case too. Although the performance is based on a definite historical event, there is muddling of history in the actual performance, as we have seen earlier. This special and temporal setting can also help in erasing these historical slips, going by Pavis's equation.

In the contemporary performance of Ta'ziyeh, Tekieh has gone through special variations. It has been adapted into houses and places. This special transfer of performance may interrupt

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[162] Pavis, Patrice. Tran David Williams, *Analyzing performance: theater, dance, and film*(Michigan: Michigan Press, 2003) 162

in the communication of all the codes to the receiver. Tekieh may also be constructed to accommodate large crowds and live animals as in many scenes dozens of players come on horseback and with real weapons. The monarchs and the well-to-do built Tekieh, as a religious service. Some of them could accommodate thousands. The space is specially structured to help the performance.

There are contemporary variations of setting and even theme (there is now the happy Ta'zieh performed during marriages and birthday celebrations) may interrupt with the reception of specific codes. And we need to ask how effective and authentic these performances are. The same is happening with Mudiyettu, as in the case of many other ritualistic folk performances which have found global audience and inter-cultural spaces of performance. Forms like Mudiyettu are nowadays taken out of their traditional ritualistic setting and performed for academic and tourist purposes. All these art forms have their roots in myths and legends and a religious belief system that has embedded its codes on the performance and its reception. These myths and beliefs are bound to specific cultures. And the performance seeks to communicate to the members of that specific cultural background. These codes are context specific and find its complete expression in the traditional spaces of performance. So do they succeed in transferring the codes when they are taken out of their traditional contexts? Do the receivers in a cross-cultural setting comprehend these codes? This debate has to be seen in the context of the current discussions on inter-cultural performances around the world.

Although, the religious strictures do not allow an extremely involved improvisation from the part of the actors, as some studies have revealed, Ta'ziyeh still leaves space for improvised acting.

Ta'ziyeh encourages the audience to relive the past. And it creates a stylised atmosphere to create this effect. The actors have to bridge the borders and gaps in time and cover up

historical slippages. And all that is achieved through an involved performance that helps overcome these gaps. As Sheriari points out,

> No barrier between acting and non-acting in this theatre can be imagined. It is where acting and life become one, where the depths of the contemporary world are revealed to both spectators and actors as they are put in a real situation and are compelled to react. This situation releases an enormous amount of energy from the actors/spectators. Their interference in the performance or their reactions cannot be predicted and controlled.[163]

At the height of their identification with the tragedy at Karbala, the actors and spectators may respond to their own most interior voices and react even in irrational ways. There are even records of killing another actor who paradoxically is playing the victim role, although logically others should sympathize with him and not kill him.[164]

Shehriari paints the picture of the great *oustad* or the master of the performance. He is not only the master of the actors and the director of the performance but also the master of the audience. He is the one who draws together the complicated lines between the stage and auditorium or between the actors and spectators. He could even have a grip over the emotional response that the spectators give to the performances. He is the cornerstone of the relationship among the actors, the characters they represent and the spectators who respond to the performance. He trains the actors and instructs them in how to get into the skin of the characters. His attempts are aimed at achieving the union of the actors and characters and the spectators and the actors.

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[163] Shahriari, Khursow. *Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers.*A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.
[164] Morier, James, 1812, *A Journey Through Persia, Armenia and Asia Minor to Constantinople in the Years 1808 and 1809*, Paternoster-Row, London.

The master has an important role in helping spectators forge in response to the performance. In addition to allowing actors to improvise their parts, he directs the audience to various responses. They respond to him and start singing, dancing or crying when he gives them a hint, and the whole theatre turns silent in a minute when they receive his signal.

> He is, indeed, at the centre of a circle, defining the radius between actor, character and spectator. Standing at the very heart of the drama with absolute power, he is there to join all the complex and contradictory images played on the stage, in order to unite and bring together the most important elements in the theatre – actor and spectator –and to exceed all the boundaries in a perfect, absolute and united picture, called theatre. He plots the beginning and the end of the entire dramatic action. He signals changes in the direction of an action or puts an end to a scene or starts a new act. He is everywhere while he is also strangely ignored.[165]

The actors communicate freely with the audience. As Shehriar points out,

> Actors are on the stage to express and share their experiences and emotion, on the one hand by acting a character, and on the other by sharing a character's experience and emotion in the process of acting him/her. It is through this intricate web of sharing experience and emotion, and not through the Brechtian style of alienation, that a *taziyeh* actor achieves self-alienation. An actor can stop playing a character for many reasons, including:
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> • to show his emotions as an actor/spectator in present/contemporary time (as when he cries, laughs or beats his chest in mourning)

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[165] Shahriari, Khursow. *Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers*. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.

• to sympathize with the character he is playing

• to sympathize with the other character/characters, as a fictional character in the past

• to 'be himself', when he sits smoking or takes tea or talks to a friend while waiting for his turn to act.[166]

The performance rises to a level where spectators may even beat the actors who are playing the role of soldiers and throw stones at the actor who is playing a protagonist such as Shimr. They sigh, groan and show their anger as the situations arise. Their physical proximity with the players because of the particular structure of the Tekieh adds to the spontaneity of their reactions.

The spontaneity of the spectator reactions rises to a stage where it even becomes impossible to control them. In big Tekiehs which house thousands of spectators it becomes riotous and uncontrollable. When a character sings, the wave of responses from the spectators gradually flows throughout the entire theatre. The master does control the responses. But is becomes uncontrollable in the later stages of the performance when twenty thousand people start dancing or singing. It is this spontaneous spectator reaction that enlivens the art form. Perhaps, Pelly sums it up in the most effective way:

> T*aziyeh* is singular in its intolerable length; in the fact of the representation of it extending over many days; in its marvellous effects upon a Mussulman [Muslim] audience, both male and female; in the curious mixture of hyperbole

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[166] Shahriari, Khursow. *Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers*. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.

and archaic simplicity of language; and in the circumstance that the so-called unities of the time and space are not only ignored, but abolished.[167]

As we have seen in the case of Mudiyettu, the performer who plays the role of Kali often goes into a trance in playing out the divine. Trance acting is a characteristic feature of ritualistic folk performances. "It occurs when performers are taken over, or "possessed" by non-human beings—gods, spirits, demons, animals or objects."[168]

> Trance acting is the opposite of the Brechtian acting. Brecht asked actors to maintain a critical distance from their roles. He wanted actors at one moment to be in character and at the next to step outside the role and comment on the social situation of the character and the action. For Brecht, the ability to choose to control history in its small details, was very decisive. He wanted actors and audiences to practice a consciously politically engaged relationship to the drama. In trance acting, the actor has little or no agency. The trancer is "taken over"—sometimes willingly, sometimes forcibly—by beings and/or forces more powerful than the performer. Trance performing is so widespread and popular because it provides actors and spectators alike an extraordinarily powerful "total theatre" experience. People enjoy giving over surrendering to all-powerful forces, melding into the community, congregation, or crowd[169].

This definition of trance acting gives us a new entry point to analyse the performances of Mudiyettu and Ta'ziyeh. Brecht's alienation does not happen at the level of the performer in the case of ritualistic folk performances. It happens in the total performances. Ta'ziyeh,

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[167] Pelly, Colonel Sir Lewis. *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain*, 2 vols., (WM.H. & Co, London; 1878)
[168] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 164

[169] Ibid.

which follows strict rules of Islamic religion, has a performance that is well-controlled. There is no scope for trance acting here.

In the case of Mudiyettu, trance acting has an important role in the performance of the role of Kali. At various points of the performance, Kali slips into a state of trance. And the singers and musicians have to make her cool off.

Figure 12 Trance acting in Mudiyettu: Kali in trance

In the case of Mudiyettu, Schechner's description of trance acting becomes relevant. The performer is taken over by the divine and in the state of trance the performer inspires awe and respect among the spectators. In the state of trance the performer approximates to the divine and he continues to be in this state even when he interacts with the spectators. As Schechner points out this trance acting provides the spectators with a total theatre experience. In the case of Ta'ziyeh, the performance takes the spectators to a state of trance and it culminates in catharsis. And we move on to the idea of catharsis.

Catharsis or katharsis (Ancient Greek: Κάθαρσις) is a Greek word meaning "cleansing" or "purging". It is derived from the infinitive verb of Ancient Greek: καθαίρειν transliterated as kathairein "to purify, purge," and adjective Ancient Greek: καθαρός katharos "pure or clean."

Catharsis is the emotional cleansing of the audience and/or characters in the play. It results from strong feelings of awe, sorrow or laughter. This aims at purifying the audience or the characters of the same feeling. Terms like restoration, renewal and revitalization are also used to denote the idea of catharsis.

The idea of catharsis was first used by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in *Poetics*. He referred to the sensation or literary effect that would help in providing the cathartic effect. He had previously used the term in its medical sense, referring to the evacuation of the "katamenia", the menstrual fluid or other reproductive material. Before *Poetics*, the term was a purely medical term. Catharsis can be seen as purification, an experience that brings pity and fear into their proper balance.

Ta'ziyeh has strong cathartic effect on the spectators. As we have noted earlier, it takes them to a state of trance and then release of powerful emotions. As Chelkowsky's analysis of the Ta'ziyeh scenes have noted, the audience is there for the ritual catharsis. The process of watching the performance ends in the audience completely identifying with the tragedy of Karbala.

> Taziyeh, a passion play depicting the Muharram tragedy, was developed, in which the people were not passive spectators, but provided the emotional response, weeping and beating their breasts, and joining their own sorrows to the suffering of Imam Hussein. The rituals provided an important safety valve. As they moaned, slapped their foreheads, and wept uncontrollably, the audience aroused in themselves that yearning for justice, who is at the heart of

piety, asking him or her why the good always seemed to suffer and evil nearly always prevailed[170].

As we have noted in the second chapter, the performance of Ta'ziyeh reaffirms the community members' sense of belonging. The history that is presented is that of their ancestors, it is presented as their history and the performance itself demands their participation as players. And at the end the entire audience is united in communal grieving and they go away as one. This brings us to the important social function of the performance of folk ritualistic performances.

The ritualistic folk performances have important social functions to play. As we have noted in the analysis of Ta'ziyeh and Mudiyettu, these performances breed the idea of community into the members of the community members. And we should not forget the fact that the viewing of these performances is a community affair. Victor Turner discusses the caharacteristic developmental relationship from ritual to theatre, and lays out the relationship of both to "social drama". He argued that "every major socio-economic formation has its dominant form of cultural-aesthetic 'mirror' in which it achieves a certain degree of self-reflexivity."[171]

> These considerations ... led Barbara Myerhoff (1978:22) to distinguish "definitional ceremonies" as a kind of collective "autobiography", a means by which a group creates its identity by telling itself a story about itself, in the course of which it brings to life "its Definite and Determinate Identity" (to sight William Blake). Here, meaning, in Wilhelm Dilchey's sense, is engendered by marrying present problems of the living present to the rich ethnic past, which is then infused them into the "doings and understandings"

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[170] Hasan Sojodi , *Taziyeh in Iran*, (Tehran: Ghatreh Publication, 2006) 36
[171] Schehner, Richard and Willa Appel. Ed. *By Means Of Performance*

(to quote John Dewey) of the local community. Some social dramas may be more "definitorial" that others, it is true, but more social drama contain, if only implicitly, some means of public reflexivity in their redressive processes. For by their activation groups take stock of their own current situation: the nature and strength of their social ties, the power of their symbols, the effectiveness of their legal and moral controls, the sacredness and soundness of their religious traditions, and so forth[172].

Thus these performances are part of the social project of connecting the present with the past and the larger project of writing the autobiography of community. In repeated and ritualised performances, these art forms give the community its identity and its sense of belonging. They mask the social crisis and give the sense and appearance of harmony to the community.

We conclude this analysis with the words of Turner that celebrates the ritual performances and their multicoloured, multifaceted possibilities.

Theatre is one of the many inheritors of that great multifaceted system of preindustrial ritual which embraces ideas and images of cosmos and chaos, interdigitates clowns and their foolery with gods and solemnity, and uses all the sensory codes, to produce symphonies in more than music: the intertwining of dance, body languages of many kinds, song, chant, architectural forms (temples, amphitheatres), incense, burnt offerings, ritualized feasting and drinking, painting, body painting, body marking of many kinds, including circumcision and scarification, the applications of

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[172] Turner, Victor. "Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama": ed. Schechner, Richard, Willa Appel. *By means of Performance: intercultural studies of theatre and* ritual (New York: Cambridge university Press, 1991) 9

lotions and drinking of portions, the enacting of mythic and heroic plots drawn

from oral traditions[173].

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[173] Turner, Victor. "Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama": ed. Schechner, Richard, Willa Appel. *By means of Performance: intercultural studies of theatre and* ritual (New York: Cambridge university Press, 1991) 9

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