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## **A World of Many Colours: *yakṣagāna rangabhūmi***

SUMMARY: The present paper examines the varied and mutual influences between a local form of South Indian dance drama—the *yakṣagāna* dance-drama of coastal Karnataka—and forms of local ritual performances. A short description of *yakṣagāna* and its history is followed by a definition of the cultural spheres represented by the languages of Sanskrit, Kannada and Tulu. These spheres form the cultural configuration for mutual interaction. The paper offers exploratory discussions of “localization” as a textual strategy in *yakṣagāna* and the possible influences between the dance drama and the *nāgamaṇḍala* and *būta* rituals.

KEYWORDS: Karnataka, folk theatre, local religious forms, performing arts.

### **Introduction and outline of the paper**

The *yakṣagāna* dance-drama of coastal Karnataka is an example of one of the many local forms of performance found throughout India. Its colourful costuming, vibrant dancing, witty dialogues and distinct musical style continue to be popular with audiences today. In this paper, I propose to show that the place of *yakṣagāna* in a constantly changing cultural context reflects the creative relationship between three different cultural spheres, namely those of Sanskrit, Kannada and Tulu. I further suggest “localization” as a strategy characteristic of the vernacular literatures and traditions of performance that emerged within a *bhakti* context. The Sanskritic influence can easily be traced in the adaptations of the Sanskrit epics as mediaeval Kannada epics and *yakṣagāna* episodes. The Sanskritic is mediated here through

the literary culture of Kannada and brahminical Hinduism. But while comparative textual studies quickly reveal some localization processes, I will focus here on less studied influences of the local Tuluva culture with its performative rituals of local deities on the *yakṣagāna* theatre.

### **The *yakṣagāna* of coastal Karnataka**

*Yakṣagāna* is a generic term for a number of performing art forms across South India.<sup>1</sup> The present paper will exclusively deal with *yakṣagāna* as a form of *music-text-dance* drama popular in the coastal districts of Karnataka and neighboring areas of adjacent districts. In this area, there are two main sub-styles, *baḍagu tiṭṭu* (northern style) and *tenku tiṭṭu* (southern style; see fig. 1 and 3). Both styles share the same textual tradition, basic performance format and organizational setup, but differ in costume, makeup, some musical aspects and dance technique. Locally, *yakṣagāna* is known as *bayalāṭa*, “play in the open (air)”. Traditionally landowners sponsored itinerant troupes to perform in the courtyard of their manor house or in a newly harvested rice field. Today the majority of performances are sponsored in fulfilment of a vow by individuals or groups from all strata of society (*harake āṭa*). Around thirty-five professional troupes exist today. They are commercially organized and attached to local temples.<sup>2</sup> The organisational attachment to the temples ranges from nominal to direct management through the temple board. Performances usually still take place near

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the relationship between the Kannada *yakṣagānas* and those of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu remains largely unexplored. If more were known about the interrelationship, it would have to be taken into account for the following explorations.

<sup>2</sup> By “professional” I do not mean to comment on the ability of the artists or the quality of their performance nor necessarily the extent of their training. I use this qualification to distinguish those troupes where artists rely mainly or exclusively on *yakṣagāna* as an income from those whose artists follow other professions to make a living. The “amateur” scene in *yakṣagāna* is vast and includes a number of outstanding artists (cf. Binder 2010: 252).

the sponsor's home. The troupes have mobile raised wooden stages with electric spotlights, amplification systems and cloth canopies. At present more and more temples are building permanent stage structures where performances may be held. Performances start at sundown and continue through the night until sunrise the following morning. Nowadays, two or three "episodes" are performed per night, and the repertoire—traditionally confined to stories from the epics *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhāgavata* and other *purāṇas*—has broadened, with the *sthaḷa purāṇas* or *kṣetra mātmyas* (Kannada: *kṣētra mātmes*) of local temples being especially popular at the moment. Old *prasaṅga* texts consisted only of songs, poems and prose passages to be sung and recited by the *bhāgavata* (singer) accompanied by drums and cymbals. Even today, spoken dialogues are usually improvised on the stage. Troupes typically consist of a minimum of fifteen male artists who often specialize in one type of character. Performances are framed by ritualistic preliminaries and closing sequences (*pūrvavaṅga* or *sabhālakṣaṇa*), which consist of songs, dances and dialogues praising various deities, the sponsor(s) and the audience. They are often severely curtailed today.

Unfortunately, the history of *yakṣagāna* as a performing art is sparsely documented. There is very little epigraphic evidence and, eventually, it remains unclear whether the tradition referred to in the inscriptions matches that known under the same term today (cf. Fischer 2004: 6). Based on the name *yakṣa-gāna* ("song or music of the *yakṣas*"), scholars have tried to establish it as a musical system that existed prior to the formation of the two systems of classical Indian music today. However, the textual evidence from Sanskrit treatises on music provided by scholars such as Karanth remains inconclusive (Karanth 1997: 82, cf. also Fischer 2004: 14, 15). A more convincing link may be seen between the Dāsa tradition and *yakṣagāna*. The Dāsa movement in Karnataka consisted of loosely organized itinerant saint-singers (Haridāsas) who composed songs to their chosen deity in the language of the common people. They played an important role in spreading Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*. Although Dāsas still exist today,

their historical focus was at the Vijayanagara court of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Fischer 2004: 63–66). There is a direct connection between the compositional styles of Dāsa songs and *yakṣagāna prasāṅgas*. They are also similar in content: both communicate essentially the same religious doctrines. References to characters and incidences from the epics and *purāṇas* are used in both genres to comment in an exemplary way on common life situations and the basic questions of human existence (cf. Fischer 2004: 65). Furthermore, invocations at the beginning of some of the earliest known *prasāṅga* texts mention Purandaradāsa, who is revered as the *pitāmahā* (“grandfather” or “founding father”) of Carnatic music. Purandaradāsa is said to have codified, among other things, the *tāḷa* system, and it can be argued that the *tāḷa* system of *yakṣagāna* represents an older strata of the South Indian rhythmical system prior to Purandaradāsa’s rearrangement. The term *yakṣa* may not originally have referred to the celestial beings, but could have been a Sanskritization of Dravidian names of communities traditionally associated with performing arts such as the *jakkulu* still found in Andhra Pradesh (cf. Binder 2013: 18).

Fortunately, *yakṣagāna* as a literary genre is far better documented. Manuscript evidence shows that *yakṣagāna* had been well established as a form of literary composition by the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest extant *prasāṅga* manuscripts refer to themselves as being written in the *yakṣagāna* style, a style characterized by a mixture of “songs” defined by rhythmical patterns set to specified *rāgas* and *tāḷas*, poems in the mediaeval *ṣaṭpadis* (six-foot morae-counting metres) and prose passages (*vacana*). The manuscripts do not mention their use in any theatrical tradition. The main verbs referring to the reception of the works mention “saying” and “listening” which suggests that their use was in narrative and possibly musical contexts rather than in dramatic performances (cf. Bapat 1998: 29). It is also interesting to note that not only episodes from the epics and *purāṇas* were re-written in the *yakṣagāna* style, but some examples of texts with non-narrative subject matter such as medicine have also been found (Karanth 1997: 82). Bapat cites Kannada scholar Krishna Bhat on his opinion about the origin of *yakṣagāna* as a literary genre:

K. Krishna Bhat is also of the opinion that *yakṣagaana* was basically a form of writing meant for worship in the temples in the form of singing. He argues that this form of worship, with music, where the songs in Kannada language were used instead of the Sanskrit incantations, was started with the group of Vaiṣṇava saints [Dāsas, kb] during the Vijayanagar empire. (Bapat 1998: 28)

Until Western-type schools were broadly established across the region, coastal Karnataka had so-called *aigaḷa maṭhas*, which provided education to high-caste boys. Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these institutions also secured part of the textual transmission of *yakṣagāna*. Reading and writing was practiced with *yakṣagāna prasaṅgas* (Bhat 1981: 183; Karanth 1997: 56). These texts were also memorized, since “education” was—among other things—measured by the depth of knowledge about the epics and *purāṇas*.

In summary, the history of *yakṣagāna* as a performing art can at best be conjectured. It is likely that it emerged in a context of predominantly Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* sometime between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and was probably preceded by a narrative tradition that incorporated music and some expression (in this, it has been linked with the Harikathā genre, which shares a link with the Dāsas and the Vijayanagara empire; Bapat 1998: 80, 107).

### Cultural spheres

The “core area” of Kannada *yakṣagāna* overlaps with the area also known as Tulunadu, the “Tulu-country”. In the coastal strip between Kasaragod in Northern Kerala and a somewhat fuzzy language border in the north, Tulu is the first language for about 2 million people.<sup>3</sup> Tulu is an oral language belonging to the Dravidian language family. There is a large body of oral literature in Tulu, much of which is connected with specific deities and their rituals, and these

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<sup>3</sup> While historically Tulunadu extended as far as Gokarna, some regard the Sita river north of Brahmavar as the current language border, while others still regard the city of Kundapura (north of that river) as a centre of Tulu culture.

in turn are the prerogative of certain Tulu-speaking communities (cf. Brückner 2009: 75). This is what I would like to term the “Tulu cultural sphere” in the context of this paper.

The second “cultural sphere” relevant for my explorations is that linguistically represented by Kannada. In terms of the *yakṣagāna* territory, Kannada is the dominant language in the northern and northern interior regions (Uttara Kannada, Shivamogga and Chikamagaluru districts).<sup>4</sup> Since, however, Tulunadu was for most of its history governed by Kannada-speaking rulers, Kannada had a strong presence across the entire region for centuries, which may explain why it has been the medium of *yakṣagāna*. The “Kannada cultural sphere” was (and to the extent that it has not been replaced by English, is) synonymous with education, local government and brahminical Hinduism.

The latter also constitutes what I would like to call the “Sanskrit cultural sphere” in the present context. Physically, it had a strong presence in coastal Karnataka in the town of Udupi with its famous Kṛṣṇa temple and the surrounding eight *maṭhas*, which, in addition to being an important religious centre and pilgrimage destination, constitute a place of Sanskrit learning and Sanskrit philosophy of the *dvaita vedānta* school. The Sanskrit cultural sphere is also represented by the subject matter of “traditional” *yakṣagāna* texts drawn from the corpus of epic and puranic lore.

These three cultural spheres together make up the “cultural configuration” in which I would like to place my thoughts below.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bapat comments: “Another important reason for the isolation of the major part of Dakshina Kannada is that of language. The majority of the population south of Bramhavar speak Tuḷu. Tuḷu [...] has a great deal of oral literature but the language of education and administration had, for the most part, been Kannada. One reason for this, is perhaps the fact that the coastal regions have mostly been under the suzerainty of the kingdoms of the mainland and so Kannada as the language of the rulers, has always enjoyed prestige” (Bapat 1998: 23).

<sup>5</sup> With this term I follow Brückner with her suggested “religious configuration” (Brückner 2009: 74).

It will become clear that these spheres are not mutually exclusive and indeed have significant overlaps.

### “Localization” as a textual strategy

The first point I would like to briefly touch upon here is an instance of “localization” of the pan-Indian Sanskrit sphere. Textual examples are convenient here. For instance, the *yakṣagāna* texts do not *directly* derive from the Sanskrit sources, but can be shown to draw heavily on mediaeval Kannada versions of the epics and *purāṇas* (cf. Fischer 2004: 82–86 and 159ff). These versions, as well as the *pra-saṅgas*, are obvious “translation projects” from Sanskrit into Kannada with this language transition being an act of “localization” in itself.<sup>6</sup> In some instances, however, more explicit references to places or persons are made. Such overt localization is also a feature of the improvised dialogues of a *yakṣagāna* performance.

### Between obvious and speculative: Influences of Tulu culture on *yakṣagāna*

Very broadly speaking, *yakṣagāna* is aesthetically and in terms of content possibly influenced by three religious traditions:<sup>7</sup> 1) most obviously, by Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*, 2) by the Tuluva religious traditions of *būta*<sup>8</sup> worship (*būtārādhane*; s. fig. 2) and 3) by local forms of snake worship (*nāgārādhane*; cf. Bapat 1998: 24, 25). Both 2) and 3)

<sup>6</sup> The main mediaeval Kannada versions of the epics that directly influenced the early *yakṣagāna* authors are the *Karṇāṭabhārata Kathāmañjari*, the *Jaimini Bhārata* and the *Torave Rāmāyaṇa*. These texts precede the earliest extant *prasaṅga* manuscripts by only a margin.

<sup>7</sup> I am aware that the shift from “cultural spheres” to “religious traditions”, though deliberate here, is limited and somewhat arbitrary.

<sup>8</sup> Although the corresponding Sanskrit term of Tulu *būta* is *bhūta*, I use the Tulu form here. Tulu does not have aspirated stops and “people without training in Sanskrit pronounce aspirated stops in Sanskrit loanwords without the aspiration” (Brückner 2009: 13, fn. 2).

are characterized by highly performative rituals that include music, dance, and dramatization. Some scholars of Tuluva folklore have tended to postulate strong and direct influences between the performative aspects of *būta*-rituals and *yakṣagāna* (e.g. Gowda 1996, Bapat 1998: 127–128). While sweeping statements such as “all folk dances including *Yakshagana* took their basic patterns from the *Bhūta* dance” (Ranganath 1960: 34) should only be taken as testimony to the authors’ unfamiliarity with either of the traditions, it is striking that the precise nature of influence remains largely unexplored. Within the limited scope of this paper, I would now like to attempt to trace some of the details where links have been suggested between the rituals of Tuluva folk religion and *yakṣagāna*.

Karant, who conducted pioneering research on *yakṣagāna* from the 1960s and has been influential like no other person for making *yakṣagāna* more known within India and abroad, has also contributed a number of widespread conceptions about *yakṣagāna* and its development. One of his ideas on the origin of *yakṣagāna* dance remains often heard: that of a link between the *nāgamaṇḍala* ritual and *yakṣagāna*. Before we examine this idea in more detail, it should be mentioned that Karant himself never assumed a *direct* influence of *nāgamaṇḍala*, but thought that these rituals might have been a partial *inspiration* for *yakṣagāna* dance (Karant 1997: 116–118).

In brief, *nāgamaṇḍala* (or *nāgārādhane*) is a form of snake-worship prevalent in Tulunadu. Very little scholarly research exists on this tradition. Regular worship takes place at *nāgabaṇas* at the foot of large trees or at termite hills where simple stone slabs with snake ornaments are placed, coloured with vermilion and turmeric. At unspecified intervals, large-scale rituals take place at or near such places. These are called *nāgamaṇḍala* and prominently involve a particular knotted floor pattern (*maṇḍala*) drawn with turmeric, vermilion and ground rice. The number of knots signifies the scale (and price) of the ritual. The main ritual action centres on the *nāga* (snake) and the *nāgakaṇṇike* (snake-princess) performed by ritual



specialists called *vaidya*. The snake-princess plays a small *damaru*-type of drum, a group of musicians beats large *ceṇḍe*-drums. During the ritual, the snake-princess recites a specific text while taunting and enticing the *nāga*. Both dance around the *maṇḍala*, and it is said that their dance traces the interlocking knots of the design back, thus “untying” them. The *nāga* impersonator rubs large amounts of areca-blossoms (bot. *Areca catechu*) into his face at intervals and gradually becomes possessed by the *nāga*-spirit. At the end, he blesses the sponsoring family and the people who have come to witness the all-night ritual. The *maṇḍala* is destroyed and the coloured powder is distributed along with the scattered areca-blossoms as *prasāda*.

From the evidence of documented rituals,<sup>9</sup> it can be cautiously said that the strongest parallel is the dance of the *nāgakaṇṇike* (snake-maiden), not very much that of the *nāga* (snake). The basic stance in *nāgamaṇḍala* is not the deep position that is characteristic of *yakṣagāna*. The hand movement (turning palm in and out), however, is similar in some instances, and some steps show similarities especially to the basic steps of female characters in *yakṣagāna*.

The second important tradition of ritual performances is that of the *būtas*. The *būtas* are a class of “spirits” or local deities worshipped in Tulunadu. Locally, both the terms *būta* and *daiva* are used for these hundreds of divine beings who have been described by Brückner as ranging

[...] from collectively worshipped ancestral spirits feasted in household level ceremonies, through heroes and other former humans deified, who died an untimely or violent death up to deities of purāṇic connexion who tend to be linked with Sanskrit mātmya-traditions. In accord with their local, regional and social variety, their worship, too, has developed many different modes. (Brückner 2009: 13)

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<sup>9</sup> I myself witnessed an eight-knot *nāgamaṇḍala* near Udupi in the winter of 2002 and documented the event on video. A large number of (for the present purpose) useful clips are available on YouTube.

While these divine beings as represented by their paraphernalia may or may not receive minimal worship during the year, they usually receive annual festival rituals (*nēma* or *kōla*). To quote Brückner again:

These last for one to five nights and take place either at permanent shrines (*sāna*) or at temporary open sheds (*dampo*) which are erected under a tree or in an open field or in the front hall (*cāvadi*) of a larger farmhouse. They are conducted mostly after the second harvest of paddy and have an aspect of thanksgiving as well as seasonal renewal of fertility. (Brückner 2009: 14)

In the rituals, the *baṅṅ/vokkaliga* (former landowners) act as patrons and organisers. Members of the “toddy-tapper” *biruveru/biḷḷava* caste provide the priest (*pūjāri*) and priestly medium of the deity. A *pambada* (professional impersonator) will be adorned with the dress, ornaments and paraphernalia of the deity. During the ritual, parts of the oral myth of the deity will be recited and partially enacted (cf. Brückner 2009: 14). The impersonator will also bless the people present and dispense judgement on local disputes.

In general, it can be said that an influence of the *būta*-rituals on *yakṣagāna* is more tangible in the southern style, *tenku tiṭṭu*.<sup>10</sup> The dancer-impersonators of many rituals, for example, perform the same spins (*girki/girke*) characteristic of *tenku tiṭṭu* dance. Further general parallels include the use of similar instruments, such as the *ceṇḍe*-drum widely used across South Indian rituals, and the use of materials and colours in costumes and makeup. The makeup of the demon characters in the southern style most strongly reflects a possible influence of the aesthetics of *būta*-rituals (cf. Bapat 1998: 171).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> At the same time, *tenku tiṭṭu* exhibits some significant parallels in costume and makeup to Kerala’s Kathakali dance-drama. Kathakali, in turn, shows influences of both the Sanskrit theatre Kūṭiyāṭṭam and *teyyam* ritual performances. But even for Kathakali the influences are as difficult to pin down as in the present context.

<sup>11</sup> The possible reference of the demons’ makeup to the appearance of the local deities when impersonated at their annual festivals might point to an implicit deprecation of these within the context of the brahminical Hinduism of the *yakṣagāna* stage.

However, my pictures show that this parallel also applies to the demon characters of the northern style.

To complicate this exploration of regional patterns of influence, Brückner has suggested a close link between the rituals in the southern regions of Tulunadu with the *teyyam* tradition in Kerala. It is further interesting to note that Brückner assumes a different direction of influence vis-à-vis *yakṣagāna* than I have found elsewhere: she suggests that the *būta* rituals of the northern areas of Tulunadu show “a certain impact of the popular Kannaḍa folk theatre of Yakṣagāna [...]” (Brückner 2009: 76). Yet a third position is put forth by Akshara in his article on *yakṣagāna* in a larger compendium on Indian performing arts, which maintains that *tenku tiṭṭu* “shows a marked influence of Kathakali, while the [northern style] is based much more on local ritual forms” (Akshara 2004: 526). By citing all these conflicting opinions I want to illustrate the complexity of these regional configurations where the individual relationships and interactions cannot be neatly separated. To conclude the comparisons on the general level, it can be summarized that the performing season of *yakṣagāna* coincides with the season of main ritual activity across coastal Karnataka. Furthermore, rituals and theatre share the same night-time performance slot.<sup>12</sup>

In examining the possible influences between *būta* rituals and *yakṣagāna*, the relationship between the folk religion and brahminical Hinduism has to be considered.<sup>13</sup> Since this is a complex topic, I can only hint at some issues, in particular the explicit reference in some oral narratives which make the *daiva* a son or daughter of a particular

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<sup>12</sup> Only recently have *būta* rituals or *nāgamaṇḍalas* become the site of simultaneous *yakṣagāna* performance. I also cannot go into the possible significance of this choice of temporal space (cf. Fischer 2004: 39).

<sup>13</sup> The complex relationship between Tulu folk religion, brahminical Hinduism and Jainism has been discussed more extensively elsewhere (e.g., Brückner 2009: 71 ff.). Any link between *yakṣagāna* and Jainism has not been documented so far, although Jainism had a strong presence in the region for centuries.

Sanskritic god (often Śiva or Parvatī) or which describe an interaction between the *daiva* and a Sanskritic god that results in the *daiva* being sent down by the god. Several oral texts localize the *daivas* “one step below the gods, one step above the *būtas*” (Brückner 2009: 13; this refers to those that are not deified human beings). Brückner has shown that the references to brahminical Hinduisms are more pronounced in the narrative repertoire of those castes of impersonators who cover an area more strongly dominated by Sanskritic traditions—such as Udipi (Brückner 2009: 110).

The position of *yakṣagāna* within brahminical Hinduism may appear straightforward at first sight—the historical association with Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* is difficult to dispute. This association is underlined by the textual tradition, terms such as *bhāgavata* for the main singer, and further by the dominance of Vaiṣṇava forehead marks (*nāmas*) as part of the conventional makeup of most characters. However, *nāmas* resembling the sectarian marks of the Madhva *sampradāya* dominate in *baḍagu tiṭṭu* while forehead marks akin to those of Śrīvaiṣṇavas are used in *teṅku tiṭṭu*. Given these clues, one would expect to find most, if not all, troupes attached to Vaiṣṇava temples. Yet, precisely, this is not the case. The overwhelming majority of troupes is associated with a temple of the Goddess (predominantly Durgāparamēśvarī). I have to date been unable to find a suitable explanation for this association which goes back far into the last century (cf. Binder 2013: 26ff, also cf. Ashton 1977: 50). The construction of the goddesses as “*yakṣagāna*-loving” is probably a recent one to induce devotees to make a vow (*harake*) to sponsor performances when the old feudal patterns of sponsorship dwindled (cf. Binder 2013: 232, cf. also <[www.kateeldevi.in/Yakshagana.aspx](http://www.kateeldevi.in/Yakshagana.aspx)>, 20-05-2014: “The Adhitha of Kateelu Kshethra, Shir Durga Parameshwari Amma is fond of Music, Dance & Yakshagana”). The association with the Goddess might bring us back to the local rituals: continuities between the cult of some *būtas* and that of (village) goddesses have been documented in several respects (cf. e.g., Brückner 2009: 97 for spatial and narrative continuities to the cult of Māri/smallpox goddesses), but more research

is needed here. In this context, the fairly recent change in the worship of goddesses in coastal Karnataka from non-Brahmin to Brahmin priests as well as parallels in the iconography between the paraphernalia of the *būtas* and *mūrtis* of goddesses would have to be taken into account.

Bapat writes: “the strong influence of ritualistic performance is very clearly evident in yakṣagaana dance. (Other aspects of yakṣagaana, like costume and makeup also show such an influence.) Perhaps a more fundamental influence of these ritual systems can be found in yakṣagaana’s approach to acting [...]” (Bapat 1998: 128). Yet there is no direct comparison of steps, basic stance, rhythmical patterns, costume material and so on in his book. It is, however, interesting that Bapat mentions the acting. As he himself points out later in his book, the fundamental difference between *yakṣagāna* and the ritual performances in question reveals itself in this context. *Yakṣagāna* is a theatrical art which does not aim at identification of the performer with his role, whereas both *būta* rituals and *nāgamaṇḍala* work with *impersonation* which implies the temporal identity of the performer and the deity (cf. Bapat 1998: 178).<sup>14</sup> Bapat further reminds us that influences on *yakṣagāna* acting cannot be seen exclusively in the local ritual traditions, but have also come from the “classical theories of acting in India” (Bapat 1998: 180). And while I myself tend to be wary of the popular inscription of “the Nāṭyaśāstra” onto existing, popular art forms such as *yakṣagāna*, the influence of what I would call the “aesthetic framework of the Nāṭyaśāstra tradition” is clearly perceivable (cf. Binder 2013: 12). This aspect also serves as a reminder that the influences I am exploring here are neither one-directional

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<sup>14</sup> It should also be noted that the dramatized parts of the narrative in the *būta*-rituals differ significantly from the “straightforward” though highly stylized enactment of narrative in *yakṣagāna*. Brückner observes: “the scene of the ritual is not theatrical in the sense of staging what is scripted by the narrative. [...] central notions of the narrative and of the cult are focused and translated into action. Ritual does not simply repeat what narrative tells but shows what narrative cannot tell” (Brückner 2009: 136).

nor mutually exclusive, and that the “Sanskrit” cultural sphere may resurface in unexpected areas.

On a terminological level, a connection between *yakṣagāna* and the *būta*-rituals lies in the use of the term *oḍḍōlaga*. This term literally denotes a “large assembly, a royal *darbār*, a royal audience” (Kittel 2004: 304). In *yakṣagāna*, an *oḍḍōlaga* is the formal introduction of an important character (or several characters) on stage using a hand-held half curtain (*tere*). These curtain entrances are set pieces of music and choreographed dances. By their nature and to a certain degree by their position in the performance, they occupy a position between the preliminaries and the performance of the *prasaṅga*. Stage conventions (the *naḍe* or *dāri*) govern their position in the performance of individual episodes as they do not appear as part of the scripted song-texts. Local folklorist Upadhyaya suggests that *oḍḍōlaga* in the context of *yakṣagāna* should be translated as “entering into the royal court and revealing oneself to the audience” (Upadhyaya 1996: 214) whereas in the *būta*-rituals, the same term is used when the impersonator appears in front of the pedestal which displays the paraphernalia of the deity (*ibidem*).

Attention should also be drawn to the significance of the anklebells (*gejje*) in *yakṣagāna*. In a similar way to most forms of Indian dance, these are revered religiously by the performers and only put on after saying a short prayer. In the *būta*-rituals, the characteristically shaped *gaggaras* have a more pronounced ritual significance. They usually signal the “passing on” of possession and the “descending” of the deity into the performer. It has been documented that the artists playing demon characters in *yakṣagāna* wore a kind of smaller-size *gaggara* similar to those worn by the dancer-impersonators (Joshi 1994: 56).

Another clue to the overlaps between different traditions may lie with the communities involved. Suffice it to say here that although I would hesitate to project *yakṣagāna* as an originally Brahmin art form, it certainly has clear Brahmin/upper-caste associations, whereas the *būta*-ritual sphere, by and large, is a non-Brahmin world. Moreover, certain communities prominently involved in the performance of

*būta* rituals (as priests and impersonators), were explicitly excluded from the *yakṣagāna* stage well into recent times (such as the “toddy tappers”/*biḷlavas*, *paravas*) or are known to have entered the *yakṣagāna* scene in times still remembered (e.g. oil-pressers/*gāṇigas*). The more significant overlap is that of the patrons who—traditionally—in both cases came predominantly from the landowning communities (*baṅṣ/vokkaḷigas*).

The last link I would like to suggest here might be found via the influence of local martial arts tradition on the performing arts.<sup>15</sup> For Kathakali, the connection to the Kerala martial art *kalarīpāyattu* is well documented (e.g. Zarrilli 1998: 201ff). Unfortunately, the forms of martial training in Tulu Nadu have not survived, but we know that the places of worship of the deified *biḷlava* caste heroes Kōṭi and Cannaya are also the meeting halls of *biḷlava* men and in former times were used as training places in wrestling etc.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusions

The above is a very preliminary attempt to trace different cultural influences between the *yakṣagāna* theatre of coastal Karnataka and performative ritual traditions found in the same area. Certain local conditions (e.g. the weather, availability of natural and man-made materials) and the simple spatial proximity of different forms will almost inevitably foster similarities. This would not, in my opinion, constitute a direct influence. Moreover, the historical evidence we can draw on is extremely limited, and the present situation may not be indicative of the configurations in the past. It is difficult to gauge in how far the Tulu ritual/performative sphere actually overlapped or even interacted with the Kannada/Sanskritic religious/performative realm beyond some general observations. Lastly, *būta* worship

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication by S.A. Krishnaiah, Udipi in 2001.

<sup>16</sup> See Brückner 1995: 63: “[...] die Verehrungsstätten der *biruve*-Helden Kōṭi und Cannaya, die als *garoḍi* oder *gareḍi* bezeichnet werden und auch als Raum für Kastenversammlungen der *biruveru* dienen sowie, in früherer Zeit, als Gymnasium.”

comprises a large number of rituals which can differ significantly, possibly rendering any wholesale ideas about an influence on *yakṣagāna* quite absurd.<sup>17</sup>

At the very least, we can say with some confidence that the cultural spheres did not exist in isolation from each other. Further, we have ample evidence from temples and oral texts that although distinctive, the *būta* cult was integrated into the broad framework of local Hinduism. For example, some *būta* shrines are located within the *kṣētra* (and sometimes the actual temple compound) of some, predominantly Śaiva, temples of the region (e.g. Sōmanātha temple Uḷḷāl, Dharmasthala). In contrast, I am not aware of any evidence of references to the *būtas* in pre-20<sup>th</sup>-century *yakṣagāna prasaṅgas*, nor have performances at *būta* shrines been documented by the early researchers in the 1960s and 70s (cf. Binder 2013: 233).

In broad strokes it can be said that there is a general continuum between ritual and performance traditions; a spatial continuum exists between (northern/coastal) Kerala and coastal Karnataka, with similarities naturally weakening as one moves north. In this way, it is not surprising that the costumes and makeup of *tenku tiṭṭu* are more similar to Kathakaḷi than those found in *baḍagu tiṭṭu*. The overall presence of *būta* rituals is also strongest in the southern areas of coastal Karnataka, while the popularity of *yakṣagāna* extends through the entire region and may have indeed left a mark on the performative aspects of these rituals. This appears most likely for the recent past, where—at least in the number of troupes and performances—*yakṣagāna* has reached a peak of pervasiveness in the region. This last point is indicative of the fact that the time factor also needs to be taken into account, in other words, that different degrees and directions of influence may be at work at different points in history.

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<sup>17</sup> It also has to be remembered that when looking at influences on *yakṣagāna*, the above conjectures apply only to the area of Tulunadu whereas the remaining areas are under slightly different cultural influences (cf. Bapat 1998: 25).



For a more balanced discussion of this topic, it would also be necessary to include the phenomenon of Tulu *yakṣagāna*. The development of using the Tulu language and the Tulu legends of the *būtas* and *daivas* in *teṅku tiṭṭu* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century responded to some extent to different dynamics than those that shaped the region previously. I have also excluded phenomena such as the formation of an initially all-*biḷlava* troupe (Gōḷigaraḍi *mēla*) attached to a *garaḍi*, their deity being the *daiva* Pañjurli, whose *pātri* or ritual priest used to appear on the stage during their performances, providing *darśana* of the deity (Narayana A. Gatty, personal communication, 2006). Further research is needed to examine textual evidence from both *prasāṅgas* and *paḍḍanas*, as well as more detailed examinations of similarities and differences in dance technique, costume and makeup.

Concluding in somewhat broad strokes here, we may say that *yakṣagāna* is an illustrative example in the context of a discussion of the relationship between cosmopolitan or global forces and regional forms as it lies at an intersection of different cultural traditions, languages and social functions. It has emerged that it is necessary not to look at details and contexts alone, but to consider the temporal locution as well. As we have seen, historically the “global” was represented by Sanskritic culture and pan-Indian forms of brahminical Hinduism. Over time, global influences have shifted to the Parsi and company theatre of the pre-Independence era and further on to Bollywood movies and television. These influences were predominantly on a performative level, but operated on the content level as well, introducing “global” concerns such as HIV/AIDS or the environment to the *yakṣagāna* stage. *Yakṣagāna* itself has represented a global influence on the local religious and performative ritual culture, which in turn has exerted a local influence on the dance-drama.

With my brief and piece-meal discussion, I hope to have shown that the relationship of *yakṣagāna* with other forms of performance in Tulu Nadu is fluid. We have seen that an aspect such as acting might lead us to find similarities in ritual and also remind us of the powerful influences of the “classical” tradition of theatre in India. Having largely refrained

from analytical categories here, my aim was to illustrate the creative relationship between different cultural spheres within a larger configuration, and indeed to show that while we may not be able to identify directions and chronologies of influence, it might be useful to look at such creative relationships that colour the cultural configurations of a given region.

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