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Karalsman :

The Dancing Charlemagne in Kerala, India

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KĀṚALSMĀN: THE DANCING CHARLEMAGNE IN KERALA, INDIA

The life and achievements of Charlemagne (c. 742-814), the Holy Roman Emperor, sparkled the imagination of jongleurs, poets and writers in many lands over several centuries. From the biography of Charlemagne (*Vita Caroli*) written by Einhard the Frank (d. 840) to the comic book in French, *Charlemagne* (Duchet-Suchaux 1990), the chain of literary works seems to be never ending. In the process, the historical Charlemagne turned into a fictional hero, assuming legendary proportions. By the time the epic poem *Chanson de Roland*, which narrates the historical defeat of the French at the battle at Rencesvals that ended in the death of Charlemagne's nephew, Roland, was put to writing towards the close of the eleventh century (Goldin 1978:4), the emperor had become a super-human hero, "past two hundred" years old! (*Chanson*, line 524).[1] Cut loose from history, the early epics chose a path of their own and spread all over western Europe (Sholod 1966:29). Following the assonant version of the *Chanson de Roland* in manuscript "Digby 23 Oxford" (the oldest known

[1] The translation of the *Chanson* I use in this study is by Frederick Goldin (1978).

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and between Princess *Plōrippis* and *Guidavar Gōnja* (Gui de Bourgogne). The manuscript is now in possession of Maneek Manakil.[5]

Interview

My interview (videographed) with Īsi Joseph Āsan, who received an award from the Government of Kerala for his service in composing, teaching and performing *caviṭṭuṉāṭakam*. The interview was conducted at his residence at Thuruthippuram, Kerala, India, on 19 January 1997.

Charlemagne's name appears in various forms in printed works and manuscripts:

Kāṛalmān (*KEC*).

Kāṛalsmān (PL2:9, 10, 13; Rafi 1980:127) or *Kāṛalsumān* (PL1: 2, 7, 8; PL3:2).

Kāṛmmān (PL1:1) or *Kāṛmān* (Rafi 1980:141).

Kāṛmmān rāyan (PL1:8) or *Kāṛmmān rājan* (PL1:2), both meaning "Charlemagne, the King" [6]

Kāṛmmān empiradōr (PL1:2) or *Kāṛmmān empiratōr* (PL2:3)

Among these forms, *Kāṛalmān* is the only one found in *KEC*. In poetry, *Kāṛalsmān* is used in the titles of the poetic version of the story, and *Kāṛmman* is the most frequently used form within

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[5] I am grateful to Rev. Thadeus Aravindath, director of Pilgrims Communications, Kochi, Kerala for securing a xerox copy of these manuscripts for this study.

[6] *Rāyan* and *rājan* are Tamil and Malayalam words respectively, meaning "king."

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version of the legend have not been explored enough. I have made only passing references to a few sources. Sabeena Rafi's (1980:50-51) attribution of a single source --Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*-- as the basis for the Kerala version of the Charlemagne legend is not tenable. In an article published in the proceedings of the sixth international conference of the Societe Rencesvals, Zacharias P. Thundyil (1974:397) has indicated a few other sources. Much work is yet to be done by way of searching for other possible sources and by comparing the known ones with the versions in Kerala. A comparison of the prose version in Malayalam and the poetic version in Malayalamtamil, along with a longitudinal study of the various stages of transmission of the legend within Kerala over the last five centuries could be rewarding. A musical study of the Charlemagne story enacted in the musical dance-drama is yet to be undertaken. What kinds of sources do you have for its musical enactment?

I can only comment that this is extremely fascinating, and you have presented it in a good way. It is a study certainly worth pursuing in the ways that you indicate.

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