

## Performance Structure & Dancing Rituals of Koodiyattam (Traditional Sanskrit Theatre Dance)



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### Abstract

*Koodiyattam is the oldest surviving art form in existence, it is the only surviving Sanskrit theatre tradition that is more than a thousand years old and traditionally performed in Kuttampalams which are theatres located in Hindu temples. Themes are based on Hindu mythology. Today it has been adapted for the modern stage: plays have become shorter, and the pace has been quickened. Koodiyattam is traditionally performed by men of the Chakyars caste, the Nambiar men play music, and Nangiars (belonging to the Nambiyar caste) play the female roles. This paper focuses on a detailed explanation of the historical background of Sanskrit plays used for Koodiyattam, the gesture language form is mainly derived from Hastalakshanadeepika where it follows Netra Abhinaya (Eye expressions). Hastha Abhinaya and performance style, literature review through ancient text, and description inside of Kuttampalams (interior structure) are Preksagraham (audience) and Rangamandapam (performer) and Rangaprasadhana (Stage Decoration). Five main items in the instrumental orchestra for the Koodiyattam are referred to as Panchavadya. Brief focus on costumes and makeup in Koodiyattam.*

**Keywords:** Origin, historical background, Hastalakshanadeepika, literature review, Koodiyattam, Chakyars, Kuttampalams, Panchavadya, Nambiyar caste, Nangiars. Rangaprasadhana.

### Research Paper

#### Introduction

This paper focuses on the ritual dances, the only living practice in ancient Sanskrit dramatic literature. The term 'Koodiyattam' in Malayalam, which means 'combined acting' or 'acting together', involves at least two actors/actresses performing. It is traditionally performed in temple theatres known as koothambalams. It is the only surviving art form that uses drama from ancient Sanskrit theatre. It has a documented history of a thousand years in Kerala, but its origins are not known.

#### Objectives of the Study

- This paper mainly focuses on Sanskrit dramatic literature Koodiyattam. To get into the roots of its historical evidence since the Pallava, Pandiyan, Chera, and Chola periods and also inscriptions related to koodiyattam are seen in the temple.
- To explore the literature review explanations through classical Sanskrit drama text, the Natyashastra, and the theatrical manual of gestures and poses, Hastalakshanadeepika[1] book.
- To know the detailed study of performers, Kuttampalams, Sanskrit plays used in koodiyattam, Decoration of the stage Nilavilakku[2]-Big lamp used in Rangaprasadhana.
- To analyze the cultural and heritage perspective view of Koodiyattam especially the performance structure of this dance, and the detailed understanding of dance rituals performed.
- To explore the different musical instruments (Panchavadya[3]) used in this act. Detailed explanation of makeup and costumes used in Koodiyattam.

## Historical Evidences

History accepts that the thought of this Sanskrit theater started nearly two thousand a long time ago. Koodiyattam was among the show-adored administrations in the sanctuaries of old India, especially Kerala. koodiyattam originated from the ancient art form koothu, specified numerous times in Sangam writing, and the epigraphs of the consequent Pallava, Pandiyan, Chera, and Chola periods. Engravings related to koothu can be seen in sanctuaries at Tanjore, Tiruvidaimaruthur, Vedaranyam, Tiruvarur, and Omampuliyur. (Johan 62)

King Kulasekhara Varman, a ruler of the Chera tradition who lived around 900 AD, had composed two dramatizations, the Tapatisamvarana and Subhadradhananjaya. He made courses of action to sanction these two dramatizations with the offer of assistance of companions. These dramatizations played a huge role in reforming this Sanskrit art form of Kerala. King Kulasekhara Varman introduced the local language of Vidusaka and enhanced the presentation of the play into well-defined units. This dramatized dance form used to be offered in worship to the gods and goddesses along with chanting of the hymns. (Viduska was a performer during the medieval and Renaissance eras who was employed to entertain the royal guests) the plays traditionally include Ascaryacudamani of Saktibhadra, Kalyanasaugandhika of Nilakantha, Bhagavadajjuka of Bodhayana, Nagananda of Harsa, and many plays ascribed to Bhasa, including Abhiseka and Pratima. (Johan 62, Shah 44)

## Performers of Koodiyattam

Koodiyattam is performed by a community of male performing artists called Chakyars and female entertainers called Nangiars, helped by drummers called Nambiars, in theater houses called Kuttampalams.



Figure 1. Koodiyattom performance

Koodiyattam is a comprehensive term that refers to more than one art form apart from Koodiyattam, the mode of

theatre in which the Chakyars and the Nangiars take part together, it too coordinating Nangiarkoothu, the theater solely performed by the Nangiars, and Prabandha koothu (or only Chakyar koothu, as it is otherwise known), the verbal narrative drama of the Chakyars. (Daughtery, 220, Shah 44)

## Kuttampalams (Temple theatres):

Sanctuary (Temple theatres) called Kuttampalams[4] are theatre structures attached to some of the major sanctuaries of Kerala.

Considered a 'panchprasada', one of the five structures inside the temple complex, these were developed between the 12th and the 17th centuries. There are Kuttampalams in the sanctuaries in Thrissur, Guruvayoor, Irinjalakkuda, Kidangur, Thrippunithura, Chengannur, and Harippad. Recently, a new one was included on the premises of Kerala Kalamandalam, a major art institution devoted to Kerala classical Arts. The design of Kuttampalam is in keeping with Kerala's building legacy. The Kuttampalam of Kerala is distinctive from the Bharata's 'Natyamandapa[5]'. Sanskrit content utilized in building kuttampalams are Silpharatna of Shrikumara (16<sup>th</sup> century) & The Tantrasamuccaya of Narayana (15<sup>th</sup> century).

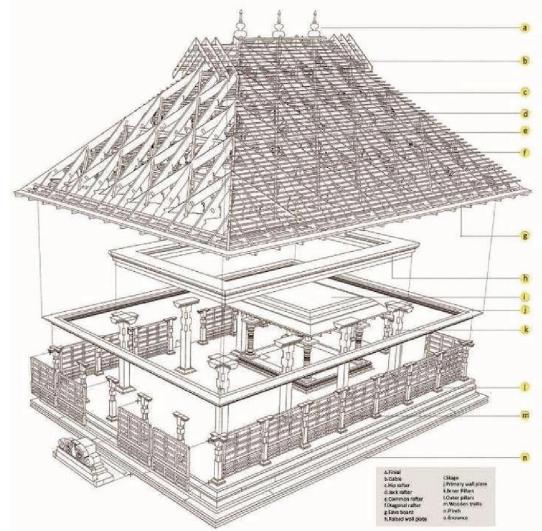


Figure 2: 3D Render Built form of a Kuttampalam

## Structure and types of Kuttampalam

Kuttampalams are rectangular mostly and the stage structure within the auditorium is square. Chengannur was oval-shaped.

- It has 3 primary parts: the roof, the superstructure, and the stone adhisthana.

- An auditorium interior of a Kuttampalam is partitioned into Preksagraham[6](Gathering of people/audience) and Rangamandapam[7] (for performers).
- Rangamandapam is divided into 3 parts: Abhinayasthanam (Performance Area), Mridangapadam (place of musical instruments like Mizhavu) and Nepathya[8] refers to “costumes and make-up” (Lowthorp 62 & Venu 44)

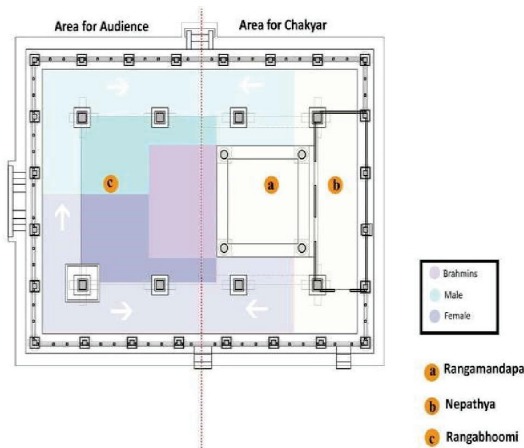


Figure 3: Kuttampalam Floor plan



Figure 5: Big lamp used in Rangaprasadhana

- **Nilavilakku** – It is a traditional oil lamp from Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The lamp is filled with oil and cotton wicks, representing solidarity, and the flames represent a heavenly presence. Nilavilakku lamps are often lit in pairs, facing east and west. The five wicks are said to represent the five faces of lord shiva.
- Nilavilakku (Big lamp) nearly four feet high and made of bell metal, is placed in front of the stage, and lit with oil. two wicks facing the actor and one facing the audience (Daughtery, Diane 221)

Vastupurusamandala: Koothambalam is related to the theory of Vastupurusamandala[9] to the hypothesis of

Vastupurusamandala, which is a combination of three words: Vastu, Purusa, and Mandala. The Koothambalam is a symbol of the “Divine Cosmic Essence” (Purusa, being the supreme natural power). The performance is observed as a sacrifice. The Mandala is a ritual diagram or plan which defines the exterior of a holy place. This careful and meaningful construction of the Koothambalam exhibits the spirituality involved in the Koodiyattam tradition. (Krishnan, Sudha Gopala 195)

### Nilavilakku (Big lamp used in Rangaprasadhana)



Figure 4: Nilavilakku used in Rangaprasadhana

Decoration of the stage: Nilavilakku (Big lamp) nearly four feet high and made of bell metal, is placed in front of the stage, and lit with oil. two wicks facing the actor and one facing the audience.

- On the right side of the lamp a vessel (para) is filled with unprocessed rice and coconut flowers
- Asthamangalya[10] is placed beside of leaf with auspicious things like tender coconuts, plantain trees with fruits, red silk, etc. The pillars are covered with unbleached clothes and decorated with plantain trees having fruits and bunches of coconut and areca nut fruits.
- On the Back of the stage mizhavu (musical instrument) is placed on its wooden stand. (Daughtery, Diane 221)

### Repertoire of Koodiyattam

Koodiyattam repertoire has the Vyayoga, Prakarana, Nataka, and Prahasana which are listed among the 10 forms of dramatization in Sanskrit writings. Koodiyattam incorporates the plays of nearly all the major playwrights in Sanskrit, including Bhasa, Harsha, Saktibhadra, Kulasekhara, Neelakantha, Bodhayana and Mahendravikramavarman.

However, striking exemptions are Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti, whose plays are not customarily portion of its repertoire. (Farley & David 223)





## Literature Review

Dramatic ideas are also explained through hand gestures and bodily poses, as noted in the classical Sanskrit drama text, the *Natyashastra*, and the theatrical manual of gestures and poses, *Hastalakshanadipika* text. (Shah 44)

## Sanskrit Plays Used in Koodiyattam

Plays assigned to *bhasa*:

**Abhisheka (Valiya):** Balivadhnam, Hanumaddutam, Toranayuddham, Samudrataranam, Pattabhisekam, Prathamdvitiyankam, Mayasiras.

**Pratima (PadukaAbhisheka):** PadukaAbhishekankam, Ravanankam, Bharatankam, Atavyankam, Pratimankam, Vilapanam, Vicchinnabhishekankam.

**Swapnavasavadatta:** Chitraphalakankam, Sephalikankam, Swapanankam, Poothootankam, Pantattankam, Brahmacharyankam.

**Pratijnayaugandharayana:** Mantrankam, Mahasenankam, Arattankam, Balacarita – Mallankam, Dutavakya, Karnabharam, Dutaghatotkacha, Charudatta–Vasantasenankam, Madhyamavyayoga, Pancharatra – Vettankam and Bhimadutankam.

**Prahasanas (Comic and loud laughter):** Mattavilasa of the Pallava king Mahendra Vikramavarma, Bhagavadajjuka of Bodhayana, Harsha's Nagananda – Rantamankam, Parakkum Kuttu

**Kerala Dramas:** Subhadradhananjaya by Kulasekhara, Tapatisamvarana by Kulasekhar, Kalyanasaugandhika by Nilakanthakavi, Ascharyachudamani by Saktibhadra (Parnasalankam, Surpanakhankam, Mayasitankam, Jatayuvadhankam, Asokavanikankam, Anguliyankam, Agnipravesankam)

**Plays of Kalidasa:** Shakuntala, Vikramorvasiya (Shah Parurl 44 & Rajendran, Chettiartodi 45)

## Styles of the temple art form

There are 3 types of Kuttu: Prabandha Kuttu (verbal-vachika) mode of presentation, Nangiars kuttu (Dramatic Acting *angikabhinaya*), kuttiyattam (join acting) (Shah Parurl 44)

## Elements of Performance

Earlier, Koodiyattam performances lasted anywhere from 6 to 40 days. Today, while performances have been shortened, they still maintain the essence of the traditional format: Performance structure—introduction

of characters, understanding of the details of the story/text, and individual performance. (Shah Parurl 44 & Venu 45)

**Purvaranga (preliminaries rites)** – The preliminaries of the enactment consist of *Talayilkettuka* (Offstagepreparation)

**Aranguvitanam** - The decoration of the stage

**Purappadu – Entry of Sutradhara/important character.** The opening portion is where an actor performs a verse along with the *Nritta* (pure dance) aspect of the performance. This serves as an introduction to the main character and sets the tone for the performance.

Whereas narration of the story has three parts:

- **Anukarma:** Narration of a story backward in the form of a series of questions, from the time of the entry of the character
- **Samksepa:** the previous story is briefly mentioned
- **Nirvahanam:** In this segment, the actor uses *Abhinaya* (expressive acting) to convey the emotions and mood of the main character. This solo act is a display of the actor's skill in mime, facial expressions, and body language, creating a vivid portrayal of the character's internal world.
- **Kutiyattam:** The final part is the enactment of the play itself, where multiple characters come together on stage. This is the most dynamic part of the performance, with intricate interactions between characters, elaborate dialogues, and dramatic storytelling. (Mono Act).
- **Mutiyaikkitta:** concluding ceremony/rituals.
- **Kramadeepika** – Production Manual: It deals with the costumes of characters. *Kramadeepika* deals with stage setup, production, usage of costumes, and remuneration to artists. These are the two major ingredients in the rich repertoire of Koodiyattam. Koodiyattam uses a host of solid techniques of presentation on stage
- **Attaprakaram** - It is the theatre manual encompassing the fourfold concept of acting as applied in Koodiyattam.
- **Pakarnnattam** - The actor during his acting steps out of her/his role and through the stream-of-consciousness of the protagonist assumes the roles of all the other characters imagined by that person and elaborates the context/scene according to his/her skill and imagination.
- **Vudishaka:** There is the text in Malayalam which is to be spoken by the *Vidushaka*; it explains the

meanings of the Sanskrit passages spoken by the hero and contains the matter that is added to produce humor. Some of the commentaries on Sanskrit dramas also contain much useful material for the actor. The story of the scenes which are to be enacted is summarized in archaic Malayalam sentences; this part is recited by the Nambiar at the beginning of the performance and is called 'Nambiarute Tamil'. The actor recites the verse with hand gestures.

### **Musical Instruments (Panchavadya) used in Koodiyattam:**

**Mizhavu**—The mizhavu is placed inside the Kuttampalam in Kutapasthana, and its mouth is covered by leather.

**Kuzhithalam**—Elathalam, or Ilathalam, is a metallic musical instrument that resembles a miniature pair of cymbals. Kuzhittala is played by the Nanyar sitting on a cloth placed to the right of the right Mizhavu.



Figure 6: Musical Instruments (Panchavadya) used in koodiyattam.

**Idakka**—edaykka/edakka, is an hourglass-shaped drum played with a small stick by an artist standing near the left Mizhavu.

**Kuzhal**—It is a traditional double reed wind instrument (has a very shrill and penetrating tone) (Shah Parurl 44)

**Sankha**[12], also known as a "seashell horn" or "shell trumpet," is a wind instrument made from a conch, the shell of several different kinds of seashells. The conch's natural conical bore produces a musical tone.

The Nambiar plays on the big drum called Mizhavu with bare hands, hence he is called Panivada. The Nanyar's duty is not only to play the role of the female characters in the play wherever required but also to sing songs/shlokas and to use the cymbals to keep the Tala. The women of the Chakayar community are called 'Illottamma' (Farley David 223)

### **Makeup and costumes of koodiyattam**

The costumes and make-up in Koodiyattam are quite elaborate. The costumes are a combination of bright colors mainly black, white, and red which stand out. The face and eye makeup are quite dramatic. Heroic characters wear green color paint and a small curved paper frame on their face. The Vidhushaka is dressed differently to set him apart from the rest of the artists. He has a different make-up with small headgear and his costume displays a clownish feature.

(Shah Parurl 43, Krishnan, Sudha Gopala 195)



Figure 7: Makeup of koodiyattam performer

### **Research Methodology**

This study is a descriptive research design. The study is predominantly descriptive when it proposes to explain the prevalence of understanding the performance structure of koodiyattam. This paper focuses on ritual dances, the only living practice in ancient Sanskrit dramatic literature koodiyattam, as well as historical evidence and literature belonging to Natyashastra and Hasthalakshana Deepika texts.

### **Historical approach**

- To analyze the cultural and heritage perspective of Koodiyattam, especially the performance structure of this dance, and the detailed understanding of dance rituals performed during koodiyattam.
- To get into the roots of its historical evidence since the Pallava, Pandiyan, Chera, and Chola periods and also inscriptions related to koodiyattam seen in temples.
- To explore the literature review explanations through classical Sanskrit drama text, the Nātyashāstra, and the theatrical manual of gestures and poses, Hastalakshanadeepika book.

### **Conclusion**

One of the most remarkable traditions of world theatre, it draws on the plays of eminent Sanskrit dramatists of

India. In recent times, Koodiyattam has gained the attention of theatre people and scholars from all over the world. In 2001, Koodiyattam was declared one of the 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' by UNESCO. Koodiyattam is the highly complicated, long-drawn-out acting method and theatrics grammar that conveys meaning only to the select few who are conversant with its codes and conventions.

Today it has been adapted for the modern stage: plays have become shorter, and the pace has been quickened. Through this paper, I would like to touch the breeze of Kerala's old Sanskrit theatre art and explain the dancing structure and rituals performed in koodiyattam.

## Footnotes

1. Hastalakshanadeepika – It is a text that is associated with the Indian classical dance form of kathakali and koodiyattam. It is a manual that provides a detailed description of the mudras or hand gestures used in kathakali, along with their meanings and usage.
2. Nilavilakku—It is a traditional oil lamp from Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The lamp is filled with oil and cotton wicks, representing solidarity, and the flames represent a heavenly presence. Nilavilakku lamps are often lit in pairs, facing east and west. The five wicks are said to represent the five faces of Lord Shiva.
3. Panchavadya - Panchavadyam is a temple art form that originated in Kerala and comprises five instruments. (Athens)
4. Kuttampalam(Kuṭṭāmpalam) temple theatre or play house by scholars is a closed hall for staging Koothu(Kūṭṭu), Nangiarkoothu(Kūṭṭu), and Koodiyattam(Kūṭiyāṭṭam), the ancient ritualistic art forms of Kerala, India
5. Natyamandapam - Nāṭyamaṇḍapa refers to the “playhouse”, where dramatic performances (prayoga) are performed.
6. Preksagraham - This refers to the part of a theater or concert hall where the audience sits.
7. Rangamandapam - a large pavilion or hall (Athens)used for dance, drama, or music. The word rang mandap is a combination of the words raṅga and maṇḍapa.
8. Nepathya – refers to makeup and costumes.
9. Vastupurusamandala - Vastu Purusha Mandala is a symbolic representation of the cosmic being or energy associated with a specific plot of land or a building. It is depicted as a square diagram divided into smaller squares, each representing a specific direction or sector.
10. Asthamangalya - is placed beside of leaf with auspicious things like tender coconuts, plantain trees with fruits, red silk, etc. The pillars are covered with unbleached clothes and decorated with plantain trees having fruits and bunches of coconut and areca nut fruits.
11. Vidushaka - Vidushaka is a professional entertainer who introduces the hero, scenes, and situations to the audience. The vidushaka acts as a medium between the hero and the other characters and between the hero and the audience.
12. Sankha – It is also known as a "seashell horn" or "shell trumpet," a wind instrument made from a conch, the shell of several seashells. The conch's natural conical bore produces a musical tone.

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