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## **KOODIYATTAM – KERALA’S ANCIENT THEATRICAL TRADITION**

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### **Abstract**

For over 2,000 years, Koodiyattam has survived as the oldest living form of Sanskrit drama, evolving into a pan-Indian dramatic tradition. While local interest has waned, international recognition and funding have revived its practice. With continued support from the Kerala government, Sangeet Natak Akademi, UNESCO, and Japan’s Funds-in-Trust, Koodiyattam is regaining prominence. If challenges of accessibility and popularization are addressed, its future will remain bright as a flourishing component of India’s intangible cultural heritage. Koodiyattam, having survived for over two millennia on its aesthetic merit, remains the longest-sustained form of Sanskrit theatre. It has now transformed into a pan-Indian dramatic tradition. International interest now outweighs local interest, with funding provided by the Kerala Ministry of Culture, SNA, UNESCO, and Japan's Funds-in-Trust. If current hurdles are cleared, Koodiyattam's future appears bright, and it will continue to flourish as India's intangible cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Koodiyattam, cultural heritage, Kerala, Koothu, Challenges.

## **Introduction**

Koodiyattam is Kerala's oldest theatrical art form, based on a synthesis of dance and acting. Thought to have originated around the 7th century CE, it is considered a 2,000-year-old Sanskrit theatre tradition. In Malayalam, the word Koodiyattam means "acting together." Recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, it stands as the only surviving form of ancient Sanskrit theatre. Native to the southern Indian state of Kerala, Koodiyattam is among the world's oldest living performance traditions. As a mesmerizing blend of dance, drama, and music, it has been preserved for over a millennium and passed down through generations. Like many intangible cultural heritages across the world, globalization and consumer culture have threatened its survival. Today, Koodiyattam is counted among India's endangered art forms. Yet, through its powerful performances, subtle gestures, and timeless stories, the tradition bridges the past and present, ensuring continuity for the future.

## **Objectives**

- To provide an overview of Koodiyattam as a performance tradition and a part of Kerala's cultural heritage.
- To examine its present status within society.
- To explore its future prospects for sustainability, based on secondary sources.
- To propose recommendations and policies for its revival and popularization.

## **Indian Dance and Drama Tradition**

The Natyashastra of Bharata (c. 2nd century BCE) remains the foundational text for Indian performing arts. Between the 2nd century BCE and the 6th century CE, Sanskrit theatre experienced its "golden age," with contributions from dramatists such as Bhasa, Kalidasa, Sudraka, and Harsha. With the later rise of regional languages, the dominance of Sanskrit drama began to decline.

## **Kerala's Tradition**

Developments in other parts of India did not affect Kerala's unique theatrical growth. The Mattavilasam (7th century CE) is considered one of the earliest Sanskrit plays of South India.

Later, important works in Kerala include Acharyachudamani by Saktibhadra and Kalyanasaugandhika by Neelakanta. In the 11th century, King Kulasekhara Varma authored Subhadradhananjayam and Tapatisamvaranam, while also composing an interpretive text (Vyakhya) on acting. Around the same time, poet Tolan introduced wit and satire into dialogues, influencing the style of performance.

## **Chakyar Koothu and Koodiyattam**

The Chakyar community traditionally performed Koothu, while women of the community (Nangyars) participated as singers and actors. The Tamil epic Silappathikaram mentions a Chakyar performing the Shiva-Parvati dance. Koothu developed into two branches: dramatic enactment and storytelling.

**Chakyar Koothu:** A solo performance with satirical commentary, often including references to contemporary events.

**Koodiyattam:** A group performance where multiple characters appear on stage.

## **Structure of Koodiyattam**

- **Characters:** Both male and female roles appear. Female characters are played by Nangyars, though evil female roles are sometimes enacted by men.
- **Music:** Nangyars sing and play cymbals. The Mizhavu (a large copper drum) is the primary percussion, supported by Edakka, conch, and flute.
- **Costume and Make-up:** Elaborate facial make-up, costumes, ornaments, and headgear, similar to Kathakali but distinct in style.
- **Acting:** Performers employ speech, song, eye movements, facial expressions, gestures, and full-body movements.
- **Clown (Vidushaka):** A comic figure who explains the story in simple Malayalam and entertains the audience.

## **Koothambalam**

Koodiyattam is performed in temple theatres called Koothambalams, specially built within major temples (e.g., Vadakkumnathan Temple, Thrissur). Following prescriptions of the

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Natyashastra, these theatres were square, rectangular, or triangular in design. One famous play performed is Bhagavadajjuka (7th century CE), a satire by Bodhayana, featuring soul-transference between a monk and a courtesan, leading to comic confusion.

## **Aesthetics and the Body**

Rooted in rasa theory, Koodiyattam emphasizes:

- Mudras (hand gestures)
- Angika abhinaya (body movements)
- Netra abhinaya (eye expressions)

The actor's body becomes a finely tuned instrument for storytelling. The legendary actor Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, for example, once enacted a death scene for fifteen minutes using only breath variations—an epitome of aesthetic mastery.

## **Ritual and Traditional Context**

Koodiyattam originated around the 10th century CE. Initially a secular performance at royal courts, it became temple-based by the 14th century. Traditionally, it was considered a sacred offering (sacchuyajna) to the deity, accompanied by rituals like Purvaranga (pre-performance rites). While ritual aspects reinforced its sacredness, critics argue that excessive ritualization obscured its artistic core.

## **Caste and Social Change**

Traditionally, Koodiyattam was the hereditary art of specific temple-linked castes: Chakyars (actors), Nambiars (Mizhavu drummers), and Nangyars (female singers/actors). Until the mid-20th century, the Chakyars were considered the sole custodians.

- Modernization: In 1949, Painkulam Rama Chakyar brought Koodiyattam outside temples, breaking caste barriers.
- Institutionalization: In 1965, Kerala Kalamandalam started a department for Koodiyattam, allowing non-Chakyar students. Today, professional identity has replaced caste identity.

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## **Reform and Patronage**

- Kulasekhara Varma introduced Malayalam for the Vidushaka, divided plays into well-structured acts, and himself authored dramas.
- New Patronage: With the decline of temple-based support, state institutions (Kerala Government, Sangeet Natak Akademi) and UNESCO have provided recognition and funding. In 2001, UNESCO declared Koodiyattam a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

## **Distinctive Features**

- Surviving link to ancient Sanskrit drama.
- Combines Sanskrit texts with Kerala's ritual theatre traditions.
- Uses Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Malayalam in performances.
- Highly codified gestures and expressions.
- Gender-specific role traditions.

## **Challenges**

- Long duration and ritualistic format discourage modern audiences.
- Restricted temple-based practice for centuries limited its reach.
- Competing art forms like Kathakali and cinema overshadowed it.
- Shortage of young practitioners threatens continuity.

## **Cultural Significance**

Koodiyattam is not only an art form but also a ritual offering. As a living tradition passed through guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) transmission, it safeguards India's cultural heritage. UNESCO recognition elevated its global profile, ensuring preservation efforts.

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