



The Moving Canvas: A Comparative Study of Āhārya in Kathakali and Koodiyattam

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ABSTRACT

Kathakali and Koodiyattam, two of Kerala's most revered classical performance traditions, exemplify the rich aesthetic and theatrical heritage of the region. Rooted in ritual and spirituality, these art forms are renowned for their grandeur, stylization, and adherence to classical performance codes. Koodiyattam, recognized by UNESCO in 2001 as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, is a Sanskrit theatre tradition with over a millennium of legacy. Kathakali, which evolved from Krishnanattam and Ramanattam, combines dance, music, and elaborate visual aesthetics to narrate epic tales, mostly derived from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Despite their differences in origin and structure, both forms are deeply interconnected, particularly in the domain of āhārya abhinaya—the expressive art of costume and makeup. The concept of āhārya (costume, ornaments, and makeup) is central to both these performance traditions, serving not merely as embellishment but as a powerful medium of transformation and storytelling. In both Kathakali and Koodiyattam, āhārya functions as the visual grammar through which character, mood, and moral disposition are communicated to the audience. The transformation of the performer into mythological or divine personas is made possible by elaborate facial painting, towering headgear, ornate costumes, and symbolic colors—each carefully codified and rich in semiotic meaning. This

meticulous attention to detail renders āhārya an essential pillar of performance, contributing equally to aesthetic experience and narrative clarity. Historically, the evolution of Kathakali owes much to Koodiyattam, particularly in its adoption and adaptation of visual and performative elements. While Koodiyattam remained confined within temple premises and community-based traditions, Kathakali, emerging later, became more accessible to the general public. Yet, Kathakali did not break entirely from its ritualistic antecedents; rather, it inherited and reinterpreted the āhārya conventions of its predecessor. The stylized masks, facial colors denoting character traits, and structural elements of costume in Kathakali reveal traces of influence from Koodiyattam, indicating a fluid exchange between these traditions over centuries. The comparison of āhārya across these art forms reveals not only their distinctiveness but also a symbiotic relationship. Koodiyattam employs subtle and symbolic visual cues, often minimalistic yet profoundly expressive. Kathakali, on the other hand, amplifies theatricality through vibrant, expansive visual spectacle. However, both traditions share a common intent—to elevate the performer into a living embodiment of the character—and this is achieved through the disciplined application of āhārya. The evolution of costume and makeup in these forms reflects broader cultural currents, the influence of patrons, temple aesthetics, and an enduring reverence for tradition. This study thus explores the aesthetic dialogue between Kathakali and Koodiyattam through the lens of āhārya, offering insights into how visual language shapes performative identity. It underscores the intricate artistry, technical brilliance, and spiritual depth that define these two classical forms. In doing so, it highlights the need to preserve and appreciate the legacy of āhārya abhinaya, not just as an accessory to performance, but as a central force that animates the rich tapestry of Kerala's traditional theatre.

Introduction:

The art of character creation in literature and drama is a sublime act of imagination, where the playwright breathes life into words and transforms them into living beings on stage. When these imaginative creations journey from the page to performance, meticulous attention to detail becomes essential to preserve their essence and power. A foundational step in this transformation is to discern whether the playwright has offered specific directions for embodying the characters. This is especially critical in classical art forms, where every nuance of appearance and expression is codified with reverence. Take Koodiyattam, for instance—one of the world’s oldest living theatrical traditions—where the intricate costume and makeup designs are not mere embellishments but sacred codes that guide the actor’s metamorphosis with profound precision.

In Koodiyattam, these visual and performative conventions are carefully chronicled in the ancient treatise *Kramadeepika*, an authoritative guide that safeguards the purity and tradition of the art form. In contrast, the Kathakali tradition, with its rich poetic scripts known as *Aattakkatha*, offers a narrative canvas that often leaves the details of costume and appearance to creative interpretation, allowing performers to infuse their own artistry into the visual storytelling. Behind the scenes, in the quiet sanctum known as the *Aniyara* or backstage, a magical transformation unfolds—one unseen by the audience but vital to the theatrical experience. Here, the actor sheds their own identity and embraces the role through the process called *Aahaaryam*—an alchemy of makeup, costume, and ornamentation that transcends mere decoration to become an essential expression of character. This space, also known as *Nepathya*, is the crucible where the physical and spiritual preparation converges, preparing the performer to step into the limelight as a fully realized persona.

Aahaarya encompasses not only the adornments worn by the actor but also the carefully crafted stage environment—the props, the lighting, the setting—that together create a vivid world for the story to unfold. These elements work harmoniously to deepen the audience’s immersion, turning the stage into a living tableau of myth, emotion, and narrative power. According to the classical *Natyashastra*, the bedrock of Indian performing arts, drama (*Natyam*) is composed of thirteen interrelated elements, with *Rasa*—the aesthetic essence or emotional flavor—holding supreme significance. The other elements act as intricate supports, among which *Abhinaya* (the art of acting) is paramount, divided into four vital

modes: Angika (gesture), Vachika (speech), Sattvika (inner emotion), and Aahaarya (appearance and costume). Of these, Aahaaryam stands out as the visible heartbeat of the character, a visual poetry that conveys identity, mood, and stature with breathtaking immediacy. This essay endeavors to explore the enchanting world of Aahaarya within the classical dance-drama traditions of Kathakali and Koodiyattam, unveiling how costume and appearance become transformative tools that breathe soul into stories and captivate hearts.

Review of Literature:

The study of Aharya Abhinaya—the visual and material dimension of performance, including costume, makeup, and ornamentation—holds a central place in the aesthetics of both Kathakali and Koodiyattam. This vital aspect of classical Indian theatre has been the subject of extensive scholarly exploration, spanning ancient treatises and modern critical works. One of the earliest and most authoritative sources, Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* (1987), dedicates its 23rd chapter entirely to Aharya Abhinaya, detailing the symbolic use of costumes and facial expressions to communicate character and emotion (Bharata, 1987). Complementing this, the *Vishnu Dharmottara Purana* provides insights into the philosophical and practical use of color, attire, and ornamentation in chapters 27 and 40, reflecting the deep interconnection between form, function, and aesthetics (Vishnu Dharmottara Purana, trans. 1992).

Modern scholarly contributions have further illuminated this domain. Sri Krishna Kaimal's *Kathakali Vigyan Kosham* (2009) offers a systematic and encyclopedic analysis of Kathakali's costume traditions, tracing their evolution with remarkable precision and contextual clarity (Kaimal, 2009). Similarly, P. M. Ram Mohan's *Nepathyam* (2003) provides a rare glimpse into the backstage world of Kathakali, offering detailed reflections on the preparation and significance of Aharya elements in shaping character and narrative (Ram Mohan, 2003).

While Kathakali's grandeur is marked by dramatic colors and elaborate headdresses symbolizing moral binaries, Koodiyattam, rooted in a more ritualistic and restrained tradition, emphasizes subtler expressions of Aharya, including historically accurate attire, minimalistic makeup, and symbol-laden ornaments reflective of ancient Sanskrit theatre (Pillai, 2010). Additional insights are found in research articles published in reputed journals such as *Keli Vigyan Kairali*, which document lesser-known traditions and interpretations of Aharya across various schools and generations (Nair, 2017). These texts not only preserve oral knowledge and performance practices but also contribute significantly to contemporary academic understanding. Taken together, these sources reveal a fascinating convergence

and contrast in Aharya Abhinaya across Kathakali and Koodiyattam—highlighting both their shared classical foundations and their unique trajectories in visual storytelling and performative expression.

Research Methodology :

This study adopts a multidisciplinary qualitative approach to explore the convergence of Aharya Abhinaya—the visual and material dimension of performance—in Kathakali and Koodiyattam. The research integrates descriptive, historical, exploratory, and comparative dimensions to develop a comprehensive understanding of costume and makeup traditions in these two classical theatre forms. The investigation begins with a detailed descriptive analysis of the fundamental concepts and aesthetic principles underlying Aharya Abhinaya, focusing on the role of costume, facial makeup, ornaments, and symbolic color usage in character representation and narrative construction. This is complemented by a historical inquiry into the evolution of Aharya practices, examining classical treatises such as Bharata's *Natyashastra* and the *Vishnu Dharmottara Purana*, alongside traditional performance manuals and iconographic sources.

To capture contemporary practices, the study incorporates field-based research through structured and semi-structured interviews with seasoned Kathakali and Koodiyattam performers, makeup artists, and costume designers. Observations of live and recorded performances offer additional insights into current applications and adaptations of Aharya components in different performance contexts. A comparative perspective is applied throughout the study to examine the aesthetic, functional, and symbolic parallels and distinctions between Kathakali and Koodiyattam, with a focus on how Aharya contributes to their respective performance grammars. The data corpus comprises both primary and secondary sources. Primary data include field notes, interview transcripts, and visual documentation from performances. Secondary data are drawn from classical texts, scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, archival materials, and credible online repositories. Together, these sources provide a well-rounded and critical foundation for understanding the theoretical frameworks, historical trajectories, and contemporary expressions of Aharya Abhinaya within the rich cultural landscapes of Kathakali and Koodiyattam.

Analysis and Discussion :

In the classical theatre traditions of Kerala, particularly Kathakali and Koodiyattam, costumes serve not merely as aesthetic choices but as narrative instruments. The visual coding of characters through makeup and attire is deeply rooted in dramaturgical theory yet adapts uniquely to each performance

tradition. Both forms align with ancient texts like the Nāṭyaśāstra and the Vishnudharmottara Purana, yet diverge in their interpretative applications. In Kathakali, character classification is grounded in visual archetypes. The green-faced pacha represents virtue and divinity; the sharp-lined kathi symbolizes arrogant anti-heroes; the red-bearded chuvanna thadi signals aggressive power; the white-bearded vella thadi is reserved for noble simian beings; the black-faced kari embodies demonic female forces; and minukku suggests soft, gentle natures. This color-symbol grammar is rigidly maintained, ensuring immediate audience recognition of the character's moral alignment.

Koodiyattam, while sharing some of these classifications, demonstrates remarkable interpretive fluidity. A character like Duryodhana, presented as a villain through kathi makeup in Kathakali, appears with a green pacha face in Koodiyattam. This variation is not arbitrary; it is informed by textual description, such as in the play *Dūtavākya*, where Duryodhana is portrayed as youthful, gem-adorned, luminous, and noble. Such descriptors naturally align with the symbolism of the pacha makeup, emphasizing the character's royal bearing over his antagonistic actions. Similarly, the portrayal of the Vanara brothers—Bali and Sugreeva—reveals the differing philosophies of these two forms. Kathakali designates both under *chuvanna thadi*, reflecting their physical strength and impulsive nature. In contrast, Koodiyattam distinguishes between the two: Sugreeva's makeup is modeled after Hanuman's, sharing similarities in form but differing in color tone, suggesting his virtuous and sattvic essence. Bali, while categorized as *chuvanna thadi*, has a green base applied to his face, a visual attempt to reconcile his divine lineage and noble inner nature with his outward intensity.

The case of Bhima further illustrates this interpretive divergence. In Kathakali, he is adorned with pacha makeup, aligning him with his brothers, the Pandavas. However, in Koodiyattam, Bhima alone among them is depicted with a red beard and the wig of Sugreeva, highlighting his fierce, passionate temperament. Such deviations emphasize the psychological and emotional complexity attributed to characters in Koodiyattam, underscoring its reliance on textual fidelity and nuance over fixed visual codes. Through these examples, it becomes evident that Koodiyattam prioritizes character psychology and textual description, offering a layered portrayal, whereas Kathakali maintains a stylized, codified system designed for immediate semiotic clarity. This divergence enriches both forms and offers fascinating insight into how visual tradition and dramaturgy intersect in unique ways within the same cultural ecosystem.

Painting Identity: Rituals and Realism in Body Makeup

The act of transforming an actor into a mythic or historical persona begins with makeup—an elaborate ritual known as *angarachana*. Despite sharing similar foundational materials, the approaches of Kathakali and Koodiyattam reflect their differing theatrical ideologies. In both traditions, pigments are naturally derived and applied in ceremonial fashion. *Manayola*, a yellow pigment mixed with oil, forms the base for many roles. When combined with *neelam*, it becomes the distinctive green hue of noble characters. For demonic characters, *kari*, created from burnt sesame oil soot, produces a deep black tone that marks their *tamasic* qualities.

Where they differ significantly is in their application practices. In Koodiyattam, the use of *chiratta kari*—burnt coconut shell ash—mixed with water and applied to the body is distinctive, offering a tactile, ritualistic texture to the skin. In contrast, Kathakali conceals the body beneath heavily layered costumes, relying more on the symbolic power of the face and headdress than on the exposure of skin. Despite these differences, there is notable overlap in techniques of facial definition. The use of the *chutti* (white frame outlining the face), the red-tinted *chundappoo* (lip decoration), and *chuttippu* (facial markings) are common to both. These elements enhance expressiveness and emphasize the moral tone of the character, allowing the actor's face to function as a dynamic canvas for storytelling.

Crowns, Chains, and Character: The Language of Ornamentation or The Semiotics of Splendor

Ornamentation, or *alankara*, is integral to the performative identity of characters in both Kathakali and Koodiyattam. It is not only an indicator of status and role but also an artistic declaration of the character's emotional and spiritual aura. The visual grammar of adornment in both forms shares many commonalities. Items like earrings, wristlets, shoulder ornaments, and chest necklaces create a visual vocabulary that communicates authority, gender, and divine affiliation. In the case of Hanuman, for instance, the elaborate *maarumaala* (chest necklace) stands out as a definitive marker of his power and piety.

The *kirita*, or crown, stands as a focal point of visual splendor. Kathakali's crowns are generally based on the *Narayanakriti* form, while Koodiyattam features spherical crowns known as *Golakriti*. Despite these stylistic variations, the underlying structure—comprising *kesabharam* (hair mound), *kalasham* (peaks), and *makudam* (top ornament)—remains largely consistent. The *Tantrasamuchaya*, a classical text on ritual art, recognizes these various crown shapes, lending canonical authority to their theatrical use. Interestingly, there is a visible convergence in the representation of female characters, especially in face makeup, between Kathakali's *minukku* roles and contemporary Koodiyattam portrayals. The

hairstyles and ornament structures of kari characters also reflect this mutual influence. The use of kumizh wood for crafting ornaments underscores the shared material culture of these two traditions, further reinforcing their intertwined heritage.

When Style Meets Substance: Aesthetic Divergences That Speak Volumes

While both Kathakali and Koodiyattam draw from shared roots, the former emphasizes stylized uniformity and visual symbolism, whereas the latter leans toward interpretive flexibility and textual authenticity. This difference is neither contradictory nor competitive but reveals two approaches to dramaturgy—one relying on codified visual cues, the other on descriptive narrative logic.

Koodiyattam's decision to paint Duryodhana with pacha makeup rather than branding him visually as a villain speaks to a deeper interest in character complexity. The same can be said for Bhima's transformation into a red-bearded warrior or Sugreeva's alignment with Hanuman in terms of costume design. These shifts are not inconsistencies but meaningful reinterpretations rooted in literary description and emotional tone. Such aesthetic choices underline how costume, makeup, and ornamentation serve not merely to decorate but to decode character, emotion, and spiritual essence. Together, they turn the actor into a vessel for myth, morality, and memory, blurring the lines between form and feeling, between the performer and the divine.

In the end, both Kathakali and Koodiyattam reveal the profound ways in which visual language can be used not only to illustrate but also to interpret, challenge, and enrich classical narratives. Their variations are a celebration of theatrical plurality, showcasing the depth and dynamism of Kerala's sacred performance traditions.

Conclusion

Koodiyattam and Kathakali stand as two of the most revered classical performance traditions in Kerala, each embodying a distinct yet interconnected legacy of aesthetics, dramaturgy, and ritual. This study explored the nuanced similarities and differences in their performance methodologies, with a focus on the convergence and divergence in their āhārya (costume and makeup) traditions. Historically, both art forms have evolved in dialogue with each other (Panikkar, 1990). As Koodiyattam gradually transitioned from temple sanctums into more public and secular spaces, the need for more visually impactful and communicative costume practices became apparent. This shift prompted Koodiyattam to adopt and adapt certain visual strategies from Kathakali, thereby enhancing its accessibility and dramatic

appeal for broader audiences (Gopalakrishna, 2005). Despite the foundational presence of traditional costume categories like Pacha, Kathi, Thadi, and Kari in both forms, Koodiyattam's earlier focus was primarily on ritual precision rather than elaborate ornamentation or detailed character-based variations in makeup and attire (Zarrilli, 2000). In contrast, Kathakali—right from its formative stages—benefited from the patronage of reform-minded royal lineages such as those of Vettathu Raja, Kaplingadan, and Kalladikodan (Richmond et al., 1990). These lineages contributed significantly to the codification and refinement of Kathakali's visual language, making it more structured and performatively expressive.

The raw materials used in both art forms for *angarachana* (body makeup) and *ālaṅkāra* (ornamentation) trace back to natural and indigenous sources, showcasing a shared reliance on organic elements (Tarabout, 1994). In its early days, Koodiyattam often utilized makeshift or perishable decorations—such as those made from the *chippu* flowers. However, with institutionalization and academic incorporation, more durable and stylized ornaments, akin to those used in Kathakali, became part of Koodiyattam's visual tradition as well (Gopalakrishna, 2005). While variations in size, nomenclature, and function exist—largely due to differences in performance scale and character emphasis—core aesthetic principles remain largely aligned. Koodiyattam ornaments tend to be smaller and subtler, in keeping with the intimacy of its performance setting, whereas Kathakali favors grandeur and exaggeration to match its highly stylized form (Zarrilli, 2000).

Thus, the convergence of these two forms is not merely aesthetic but indicative of a larger cultural symbiosis. The interweaving of visual traditions, performance practices, and material cultures underscores the dynamic adaptability of Kerala's classical theatres. This synthesis of ritual precision and theatrical splendor enriches both traditions, allowing them to evolve while staying rooted in their cultural ethos (Panikkar, 1990; Interview with Guru Moozhikkulam Kochukuttan Chakyar, 2003; Personal fieldwork, 2024–2025).

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