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# Transcreating Sanskrit Humor through Kūṭiyāṭṭam: The Translation and Performance of the *Rasasadana Bhāṇa*

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# Transcreating Sanskrit Humor through Kūṭiyāṭṭam

## The Translation and Performance of the *Rasasadana Bhāṇa*

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**ABSTRACT**

This article develops a collaborative, performance-oriented approach to translating the *Rasasadana Bhāṇa* of Godavarma Yuvarāja (1800-1851), a Sanskrit dramatic work from Kerala in South India. The *bhāṇa* is a genre of Sanskrit comedic monologue with examples dating from the late Gupta period (c. 500 CE), and which has had a significant but largely overlooked presence in Kerala since the fourteenth century. To better understand this presence and to explore how performance might enhance the practice of translation, we partnered with the Nepathya Centre for Excellence in Koodiyattam to produce multimedia "transcreations" of select verses from the *Rasasadana* performed in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam style. This article outlines our methodology and presents key outcomes from our research conducted remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The juxtaposition of English translation and Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance in a digital multimedia format, we find, not only reveals the deeper valences of Sanskrit humor in Kerala, but also enables tradition-bearers to participate actively in the translation process.

**Keywords:** Sanskrit, theater, *bhāṇa*, Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Kerala, transcreation, humor, translation, performance

## 1. Introduction*

Sometime in the early 1800s, Godavarma Yuvarāja, the noted scholar, poet, and ruler of the principality of Kodungallur (Cranganore), composed a Sanskrit comedic monologue, or *bhāṇa*, called the *Rasasadana*, or "House of Love" (Shivadatta and Parab 1893).[1] While it was not the very last *bhāṇa* written in Kerala, this lively and erudite work falls at the end of a robust 500-year history of *bhāṇa* production in this region of South India (1300-1800). As such, the *Rasasadana* offers a rich snapshot of the intricacies of performance, social life, and the cosmopolitan cultures of pleasure in Kerala (Freeman 2003: 453-457) on what has been called "the eve of colonialism" (Pollock 2002). Besides the *Rasasadana*, quite a few other *bhāṇa*s were written in Sanskrit as well as Malayalam during this time (Devarajan 1988, Raji 1999). Extensive textual and ethno-historical research is necessary in order to explain how and why these plays were produced and their role in the formation of the unique cultural identity of early modern Kerala.[2] As groundwork for such a project, this article develops a performance-oriented approach to the basic task of translating and

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[1] While the title literally means "House of Aesthetic Emotion," we use the translation "House of Love" to indicate both the dominant emotive experience of this play (*śṛṅgāra* or eros) and a nod towards the courtesan culture of the red-light district that is the central setting of the *bhāṇa*.

[2] For historical studies of early modern Kerala, see Bayly 1984, Veluthat 2009, Devarajan 2011, Malayil 2018, Vielle 2019.

making sense of Godavarma's play, and investigates whether such an approach might help us better appreciate the cultural significance of the Kerala *bhāṇa*s.

The first step in making cultural claims about a text is to translate the text. This essay poses three methodological questions about translation in the case of the *Rasasadana*. First, we ask, what are the affective qualities of this Sanskrit theatrical work that are to be represented in English? Of particular concern is the production of aestheticized humor, or *hāsya*, which is one of the hallmarks of the *bhāṇa* as a genre. Second, how might the performance traditions of Kerala—specifically Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Cākyārkūttu—help us to present the affective dimensions of this Sanskrit humor? That is to say, how does traditional performance itself already involve a process of "intersemiotic translation" or "transmutation" (Jakobson 1959: 114, cited in Williams 2013: 8) that might be mobilized for translation into English? Finally, we explore how we might juxtapose live performance and literary translation as *transcreation*, as theorized by Purushottam Lal (Lal 1996, Mukherjee 1997), in order to effectively allow readers to have an affective engagement with the text.

These findings represent the results of a research collaboration with the Nepathya Centre for Excellence in Koodiyattam carried out in December 2020 in the village of Moozhikkulam, Kerala. Due to global travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, we used online videoconferencing technology to work remotely with Nepathya, who recorded a 20-minute live performance of one verse from the *Rasasadana Bhāṇa*. To this footage, we then added our own English translation of this verse as subtitles, and presented the resulting video alongside a textual translation of the episode within the play (see Appendix). Our initial findings suggest that a performance-centered, multimedia approach to translation allows for the communication of complex layers of emotive and ironic meaning for global English-language consumers, while at the same time enabling the traditional culture-bearers of Kūṭiyāṭṭam to be involved at an integral level in knowledge production and dissemination.

## 2. Translating Sanskrit Humor

Let us begin by outlining our theoretical framework for "transcreating" Sanskrit humor for global English-language audiences through the intervention of performance. Kūṭiyāṭṭam is the only surviving living tradition of Sanskrit theater, preserved since at least the sixteenth century in the temples and courts of Kerala, with precursors as far back as the ninth (Devadevan 2020: 227-230).[3] Since 2001, it has been inscribed by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (Gopalakrishnan 2011a; Lowthorp 2015, 2020). Our collaborative process began with the hosting of hosting several preliminary videoconference sessions with Margi Madhu Chakyar and Indu G., the directors of the Nepathya Centre for Excellence in Koodiyattam, to select representative verses and prose passages from the *Rasasadana* for performance. We then conducted two formal interviews in English and Malayalam on December 7 and 18, 2020, in which they discussed the significance of humor in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the humor of the *Rasasadana*, and how

[3] Generally scholars have placed the origins of Kūṭiyāṭṭam somewhere between the ninth and twelfth centuries; however, Devadevan (2020: 228) has pointed out that while Sanskrit theater was produced in Kerala as early as the ninth century, the earliest specific mention of Kūṭiyāṭṭam comes in the sixteenth-century *Kramadīpikā*, a stage manual for the seventh-century *Bhagavadajjuka* of Mahendravarman. For further historical analysis, see Moser 2008, Narayanan 2021, Shulman 2022.

they might go about staging it for audiences in Kerala. These were edited and released as a short film (*https://youtu.be/okgT9_CZw_w*). The Nepathya ensemble then produced a digital recording of a live 20-minute Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance of one verse selected from the *Rasasadana* (verse 230), filmed on December 20, 2020, at their traditional performance space (*kūttampalam*) in Moozhikkulam, Kerala. To this recording, we then added subtitles containing the Sanskrit text and our English translation (*https://youtu.be/O63p8zXdvJs*). This digital multimedia approach, we hypothesized, might help to overcome certain unique challenges in translating Sanskrit humor into English.

What exactly are these challenges? To begin with, the process of textual translation in any context involves a fine balance between fidelity to the original text (referred to as "equivalence," "accuracy," or literal translation) and its recontextualization within the cultural sphere of target-language readers ("accessibility" or free translation). Peter Newmark (1993: 11) suggests that "adherents to the former favour source-text-oriented translation and are sometimes referred to as 'sourcerers,' while the latter accommodate their translation to the receiving, or 'target' culture and are known as 'targeteers'" (cited in Williams 2018: 72). In a similar vein, A. K. Ramanujan had remarked that "the translation must not only represent, but *re*-present the original. One walks a tightrope between the To-language and the From-language, in a double loyalty" (Ramanujan 1999: 231; see also Choudhuri 2010: 122, Steiner 1975: 235).[4]

The tension and width of this tightrope can vary depending on the text being translated. For example, in the case of a prominent work like the *Bhagavadgītā*, a Hindu scripture whose translations number in the thousands (see Callawaert and Hemraj 1983), readers have the luxury of choice and may take recourse to several different translations depending on their needs and inclinations. A new translator might therefore feel at liberty to act as a "sourcerer" (e.g., Malinar 2012, Zaehner 1969), a "targeteer" (e.g., Stoler Miller 1986, Rao 2010), or somewhere in between (e.g., Patton 2008). On the other hand, in the case of little-known texts like the *Rasasadana*, where there are few, if any, other translations, we are compelled to tread carefully on Ramanujan's "tightrope," since our translation will be the first and only access point for contemporary English-language readers.

It is especially challenging to maintain this balance between accuracy and accessibility when it comes to translating humor. Not only are there complex linguistic considerations in mapping the source text into the target language, but one must also provide the cultural references and conventions that are needed to grasp why a verbal utterance is funny. As Delia Chiaro (2010: 8) puts it, "the problem with translating humor more often than not is that it is 'untranslatable' in the sense that an *adequate degree of equivalence* is hard to achieve." Sociolinguistic theorists explain that humor operates by generating incongruities ("overlapping scripts" in the terminology of Attardo and Raskin 1991) on two major levels: the linguistic/textual, in which wordplay, double-entendres, puns, and other figures create incongruities recognized by the reader, and the

[4] For more on Ramanujan's philosophy of translation, see Dharwadker 1999. We should also note that English translations of South Asian literatures have two potential readerships: readers located outside South Asia, for whom translations serve to advance a scholarly understanding of the region, and those located within South Asia for whom translations offer gateways into regional literatures different from one's own (Mukherjee 1981: 9-10). For additional resources on South Asian/Indian approaches and contexts for translation, see Chaudhuri 2014, Devy 1999, Gopinathan 2014, Niranjana 1992, Parthasarathy 2003, Trivedi 2019.

referential/contextual, in which incongruities occur within cultural features being referenced by the text.[5] The more linguistic and cultural features the source and target language groups have in common, the easier it is to translate a humorous text: "The greater the area of superimposition, the greater the osmosis between Source and Target and, in the case of [Verbal Expressive Humour], the greater the likelihood of amusement in the Target language" (Chiaro 2010: 12).

In the case of translating Sanskrit humor into English, the two linguistic milieux are separated by a great distance of time and space, thereby minimizing the likelihood of such meaningful osmosis. Take, for example, one benedictive verse uttered by the stage manager (*sūtradhāra*) at the start of Godavarma's play:

*nityaṃ naś cittapadme parilasatu kapālī kapālīkapālī-*
*mālādhārī samastapramadajanakalāpaḥ kalāpaḥ kalāpaḥ |*
*bhūtvā nirbhāti yasyādhikam asusamarīṇāmarīṇām arīṇām*
*utpeṣṭā yaś ca dūrīkṛtakamalamahastomahasto mahastaḥ ‖* (*Rasasadana* 4)

May Śiva play around deep in our hearts, carrying a skull (*kapālī*)
and wearing a necklace of heads (*kapālī*)
on a string that is a hissing serpent (*ka-pa-ālī*).
The moon (*kalā-āpa*),
who guards over the artistry (*kalā-pa*) of everyone in love,
has turned into an ornament (*kalāpa*) on his head
and beams down even more.
He's a crusher of the enemies (*ariṇāṃ*) of the divine goddesses (*amarīṇāṃ*),
who are separated from those as dear to them as life itself (*asu-sama-rīṇā*).
His hand (*hasta*), through its radiance (*mahas-taḥ*),
surpasses the fame of the beauty (*maha-stoma*) of the lotus.

The humor of this verse relies on a series of verbal paronomasia, called *śabda-śleṣa* in Sanskrit, in which each line punningly repeats the same set of syllables three times, but with different meanings in each occurrence based on how the syllables are parsed. In the first line, the word *kapālī* is first used as an epithet of Śiva, meaning "carrying a skull." This set of syllables then appears twice within a compound that stretches across to the next line, *kapālīkapālīmālādhārī*, and which may be parsed as follows:

*ka-pa-ālī-kapālī-mālā-dhārī*
*ka* - "air"
*pa* - "drinker"
*ālī* - "row, string"
*kapālī* - "head"
*mālā* - "garland, necklace"
*dhārī* - "wearing"
"wearing a necklace of heads on a string that is a hissing (*air-drinking*) serpent"

[5] Attardo and Raskin distinguish six "knowledge resources" that are needed to appreciate humor: script oppositions, logical mechanisms, situations, targets, narrative strategies, and language (Attardo 2017; Attardo and Raskin 1991; Ruch et al. 1993).

In the second line, we find another triplet of the word *kalāpa*. The first is parsed as "the one which has phases" (*kalā-āpa*)—i.e., "the moon." The second is taken to mean "protecting the artistry" (*kalā-pa*), while the third *kalāpa* is read as "ornament."

In the third line, Godavarma's wordplay gets even more complicated, as the word *arīṇāṃ* is repeated three times. One occurrence comes at the end of the line, and takes the meaning "of the enemies." The others are embedded within a rather complicated compound that can be parsed as follows:

*asu-sama-rīṇa-amarīṇāṃ*
- *asu* - "life-breath"
- *sama* - "same as, equal to"
- *rīṇa* - "detached, severed from"
- *amarīṇāṃ* - "of the goddesses"

"of the goddesses who are separated from those as dear to them as life itself"

Lastly, in the fourth line, we see the triple repetition of the word *mahastaḥ*. Here, the final utterance is parsed as *mahas-taḥ*, meaning "due to its radiance." The two earlier occurrences of these syllables again are found within another elaborate compound:

*dūrīkṛta-kamala-maha-stoma-hastaḥ*
- *dūrīkṛta* - "made far (lit.), surpassed"
- *kamala* - "lotus"
- *maha* - "beauty, luster"
- *stoma* - "praise, fame"
- *hastaḥ* - "hand"

"a hand that surpasses the fame of the beauty of the lotus"

The primary vector of humor in this verse lies in the reader's appreciation of the many-layered paronomasia, since syntactic incongruities are generated when the reader seeks out a meaning that can only emerge when the syllables are repeatedly disassembled and reassembled. It works, in this sense, like a riddle or a puzzle, such that the reader experiences delight upon successfully "untying the knot," as it were. A second, cultural set of references is also at play here, through the multiple mythological references to Lord Śiva as a Hindu deity. The first line, for example, is a reference to his skull-bearing form which he took on in penance after the beheading of the god Brahmā. The second line refers to the crescent moon that is commonly depicted as being lodged in the dreadlocks of Śiva's iconic representation as Candraśekhara. The third line offers a generic reference to the eternal battles between the gods and the demons, and more specifically to Śiva's role in the destruction of Tripura. The last line, focusing on the beauty of Śiva's hand, appears to refer to a specific statue or *mūrti* of the god, perhaps a localized reference that would make sense to readers living in the town of Kodungallur. Such intricacies of sound and meaning are lost in translation, and it is unclear if any English rendering of this verse might be so funny as to make the reader laugh, or even smile, without recourse to the Sanskrit text itself.

Given the untranslatability of such complicated forms of humor, what should a translator do? Do we ignore the comedic value of the text and focus only on maintaining a fidelity to the literal meaning? Or, accepting that a translation can never be a perfect copy of the original, do we focus instead on communicating its humorous function or *skopos*, while delivering as much of its

core linguistic and semantic properties as possible?[6] Perhaps we might instead follow the suggestion of Debra Raphaelson-West, who proposes a goal of education, rather than equivalence:

> It is possible to translate something so that the effects are also translated. If this is impossible, however, it is still possible to do a translation in order to let the reader know that there *is* something in another language and that it is something like your translation. Using explanation and/or awkward language means sacrificing the dramatic effect, but it is useful for cross-cultural purposes. (Raphaelson-West 1989: 128)

In other words, it may be most practical and sensible for a translator of a complex and obscure Sanskrit text to aim to improve their readers' knowledge of, access to, and appreciation for the source text, rather than simply representing it in the target language.

For most Sanskrit translators, this has involved writing scholarly introductions, copious notes, parenthetical glosses and references, glossaries, afterwords, and other embellishments to the translated text. Even our translation of the benedictive verse above contains such paratextual features. In the case of theatrical works, however, the translator is not alone in the task of educating contemporary audiences about the form and function of these texts—for this is precisely what actors are asked to do.

This is nowhere more evident than in the Sanskrit theatrical tradition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Performers of Kūṭiyāṭṭam and related traditions employ their bodies, facial expressions, costume, staging, percussion, music, song, and other devices that match, and in some cases surpass, the communicative power of paratextual references and notes. As we discuss below, the live performance of humor involves irony or incongruity that is visual or physical in nature, generating a greater intercultural overlap to facilitate the process of translation. Moreover, live performances can metatextually generate and communicate the contexts of humor in ways that are more immediate, more direct, and more impactful. Especially considering that the *Rasasadana* was composed in early modern Kerala, where performance was a core marker of cultural identity, we suggest that integrating traditional performance with textual translation can help to communicate the otherwise incommunicable aspects of Sanskrit humor.

## 3. The *Rasasadana* as a Kerala *Bhāṇa*

Adopting this performance-centered theoretical framework, our project seeks to "transcreate" portions of the *Rasasadana Bhāṇa* of Godavarma Yuvarāja (1800-1851), one of the more notable examples of the Sanskrit *bhāṇa*s of Kerala (see Kunjunni Raja 1980: 247-250). Godavarma, also known as Vidvān Iḷaya Tampurān, belonged to the royal family of Kodungallur, "well-known for its encouragement and propagation of Sanskrit education in Kerala" (Kamala Kumari 1993: 8). As a city, Kodungallur was an important religious, intellectual, and political center, and a thriving site for the regional performing-arts cultures of nineteenth-century Kerala.[7] Godavarma,

[6] On *skopos* theory see Vermeer 1989, and for "invariant core" see Popovič 1976; both sources cited by Chiaro (2008: 577).

[7] In the Cera period (ninth-twelfth centuries) Kodungallur represented a political and economic center; by the eighteenth century the town was part of a lively network of Kerala intellectuals (Kunjunni Raja 1980:

meanwhile, was a prolific poet and scholar, composing at least seventeen poetic and theoretical works in Sanskrit and a number of others in Malayalam (Kamala Kumari 1993: 28-30). He is said to have initiated the Veṇmaṇi literary school (Kamala Kumari 1993: 9), noted for its adoption of a "pure" Malayalam register and its focus on realism and naturalism (Ramachandran Nair 1999: 851).

**Figure 1.** The Sree Kurumba Bhagavathy Temple of Kodungallur. Image credit: Sarah Welch / Wikimedia Commons.

The *Rasasadana* is a typical example of a Sanskrit *bhāṇa*, or comedic monologue, one of the classical forms of theater (*rūpaka*s) delineated in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* ("Treatise on Dramaturgy," third century CE). While later theorists like Dhanañjaya (tenth century) or Abhinavagupta (eleventh century) have different viewpoints regarding the features of this genre, there is a general agreement that a *bhāṇa* should feature (a) one act, (b) one character, the Viṭa or "playboy," who (c) proceeds on a certain errand, mission, or adventure through various urban spaces (including the red-light district), engaging with a number of unseen characters (including courtesans, clients, assistants, scoundrels and criminals, monks and nuns, priests, officials, merchants, and others) using (d) a unique technique called "talking to the sky" (*ākāśabhāṣita*) (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 18.152-154; cited in De 1926: 65; see also Baldissera 1980: i-iii).[8]

In terms of style, Bharata maintains that the *kaiśikī* (gentle, graceful) mode of oration should be avoided in favour of *bhāratī* (expressive, dialogical) (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 18.8-9, cited in Bose 1991: 150), while Dhanañjaya prescribes that the *bhāṇa* should feature the *rasa*s (aestheticized emotions) of *śṛṅgāra* and *vīra* (erotism and heroism). It should be said, however, that *bhāṇa*s seldom develop the latter, and even with regards to the former, they do not generally rise to the heights established by Kālidāsa, Bhavabhūti, or other masters of Sanskrit poetry. While *bhāṇa*s certainly

247-252) and constituted a sacred center for people of different religious affiliations or beliefs (Veluthat 2009: 229-248), as exemplified by two main festivals: the Tālappoli and the Bharaṇi.

[8] In Sanskrit dramaturgy, the terms *bhāṇa*, *bhāṇaka*, *bhāṇikā*, or *bhāṇī* are also used to denote different kinds of *uparūpaka*, or minor drama, involving physical movement, dance, and instrumental music (see Bose 2000: 302-303).

dwell on the vagaries of sexual attraction, carnal pleasures, and the intricacies of courtesan culture, they tend to bracket their depictions of sexual activity within an ironic register by exposing prudes, hypocrites, and naïve or misguided lovers within this *kāma*-centered world. Conversations with courtesans, moreover, generally emphasize flirtation, teasing, or, again, ironic asides to the audience. There is an overall feeling of lightheartedness, frivolity, and voyeuristic delight, making *bhāṇa*s appear more closely aligned with *prahasanas* (farces) and other dramatic forms that generate the *hāsya rasa*, aestheticized humor.

The *Rasasadana* exhibits all of the features expected of a *bhāṇa*. There is, to be sure, a noticeable deviation from the "one-man show" structure at the start, as an actress (Naṭī) joins the director on stage to give benedictions and to set up the premise of the play. But for the rest of the show, only one character is physically present on stage: the Viṭa, here named Pallavaka. He is a clever, confident, and married expert in the erotic arts and the ins and outs of the red-light district. A friend of the Viṭa has asked him to escort his wife, Candanamālā, to the temple of Bhadrakālī amidst the annual Keliyātrā (Tālappoli) festival that is happening in its environs. During the morning hours, the Viṭa successfully accomplishes this task, while encountering several courtesans and other characters along the way. In the evening hours, the Viṭa again embarks into the temple area, where he meets various courtesans and observes many different kinds of local entertainers at the festival, including singers, dancers, circus acrobats, sword jugglers, magicians, and theatrical artists. His day ends with a return to his friend's home, where he engages in witty banter with his friend and his wife.

Historically, the *Rasasadana* comes near the endpoint of a long trajectory of development of the *bhāṇa* as an art form. The earliest extant example is the *Caturbhāṇī* ("Four Comic Monologues"), a well-known anthology of four *bhāṇa*s that have been dated to the late Gupta period (c. 500 CE) (Motichandra and Agarwal 1959, Janaki 1974, Ghosh 1975, Dezső and Vasudeva 2009). For reasons that are not clear, there is then a significant chronological gap in *bhāṇa* production until about the thirteenth century, when we begin to see examples mostly from South India. In an early study of the genre, S. K. De (1926) had observed that the plays of the *Caturbhāṇī* featured a "larger amount of social satire and comic relief" (1926: 73) than the medieval examples, as well as a greater diversity of characters (76, 80), and that later *bhāṇa*s "become in the course of time entirely erotic" (83). This led De to argue that the medieval *bhāṇa*s "became mere literary exercises and subsided into a conventional and lifeless form of art" (De 1926: 72). We do not, however, find this criticism to be warranted, and maintain instead that medieval *bhāṇa*s, just like the earlier *Caturbhāṇī*, were produced with an intimate interest in mapping what Shonaleeka Kaul has described as a classical "kāma culture" (Kaul 2010: 195-208) onto the complex urban spaces of realworld cities (see also Gönc Moačanin 2012).[9] In the case of the *Rasasadana*, these were the streets and alleyways around the Bhagavathy (Bhadrakālī) temple in the heart of early nineteenth-century Kodungallur. Far from being "lifeless," this *bhāṇa* was deeply embedded within the cultural life of this temple town, and articulated the voice of one of its key intellectual proponents. Furthermore, rather having what De (1926: 72) called a "monotonous insistence on the erotic sentiment," we argue that the humor of the *Rasasadana* is highly referential and situated within the immediate context of its Kerala readership. Godavarma, in other words, didn't write his play simply to titillate, but rather to amuse, charm, and to provide a voyeuristic vision of the cultures

[9] In a recent publication, Talia Ariav and Whitney Cox have proposed a similar argument regarding De's thesis, suggesting that later authors were focusing on making "interesting and creative use of the generic conventions" (Ariav and Cox 2021: 56) of the *bhāṇa*.

of pleasure and performance that were taking place in the streets, temples, and palaces of Kodungallur (see Raji 1999: 59-63).

It is important to recognize that these cultures of pleasure and performance were highly localized. T. Devarajan's in-depth study (1988) of Kerala *bhāṇa*s demonstrates that between the fourteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, a great number of *bhāṇa* plays were produced and performed in Sanskrit and Malayalam for audiences across Kerala. Devarajan connects their significance to major temples, festivals, and the feudal social-political order of Kerala at this time, and maintains that "they represent a transition in the literary activities of Kerala, from the traditional religious and moral disciplines to the more naturalistic materialism" (Devarajan 1988: 582). K. K. Raji (1999: 66-85) likewise compares the Kerala *bhāṇa*s with another realm of performance that was growing in importance in Kerala during this same time period: the traditional arts of Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Cākyārkūttu. Raji explains that the role of the Vidūṣaka or clown within Kūṭiyāṭṭam, and the Cākyār or actor in Cākyārkūttu, was to serve as a voice of social critique of the political and priestly classes. As she puts it, "He created his own world to ridicule and at times to criticise the society" (Raji 1999: 81). Noticing a parallel monological and world-creating role of the Viṭa in the Kerala *bhāṇa*s, Raji suggests that these two artistic forms had a mutually impactful relationship: "The fact remains that the Bhāṇas influenced...the Cākyār Kūttu and [in turn] the Cākyār Kūttu encouraged the composition of a large number of Bhāṇas" (Raji 1999: 83).

As an illustration of the reciprocal nature of Kerala Sanskrit *bhāṇa*s and Malayalam performance traditions in the *Rasasadana*, we might consider the following fascinating description found in this play of a performance of *ōṭṭantuḷḷal*, a uniquely Malayalam expressive song-and-dance art form created and popularized by Kunchan Nambiar (1705-1770) only a few decades before Godavarma composed his *bhāṇa* (Sharma 2000). The description comes as the Viṭa is touring the grounds outside of the Bhagavathy temple in Kodungallur, where he sees all kinds of local entertainment performed during the famed Tālappoli festival taking place at the temple.[10] Through a series of Sanskrit verses, Godavarma describes a performance of *ōṭṭantuḷḷal* (verse 200), dance (verse 206), tightrope acrobats (verses 201-201), magicians (verses 203-204), various forms of swordplay, known as *vāḷeru* (verses 205-207), as well as what appears to be a form of Kūṭiyāṭṭam or Cākyārkūttu (verses 220-221; see Kamala Kumari 1993: 121 and further discussion below). These verses themselves constitute a kind of "back-translation" of vernacular art forms into Sanskrit, whereby familiar localized terms, tools, and actions are projected into the classicalized, rarified space of the Sanskrit *bhāṇa*. In so doing, the *Rasasadana* perhaps ironically harmonizes with a wider tradition of Malayalam translation that came to define a regional cultural identity in Kerala (Ramakrishnan 2009).

Here is how Godavarma depicts *ōṭṭantuḷḷal*:

*gāthāṃ keralabhāṣayā viracitāṃ śṛṅgārahāsyādibhiḥ*
*pūrṇāṃ puṇyapurāṇavarṇanamayīṃ gāyann ayaṃ nartakaḥ |*
*tālojjṛmbhitamardalasvanasamaṃ nṛtyan dṛśor vibhramair*
*bhāvavyañjanakāribhir vitanute prītiṃ sabhāvāsināṃ ‖* (*Rasasadana* 200)

[10] As mentioned above, Kodungallur is famous today for two festivals involving Bhadrakālī—the Tālappoli and Bharaṇī. The former consists mainly in the offering of rice plates to the Goddess, and is carried out elsewhere in Kerala as well. The latter, in which insulting "prayers" are chanted to the Goddess, is unique to Kodungallur (Induchudan 1969 and Elayath 2003).

This actor is singing a song composed in the language of Kerala,
based on a story from a sacred *purāṇa*.
It's filled with erotism, humor, and all that.
He dances in sync to the sounds of the *maddaḷam* drum (*mardala*),
that are bolstered (*ujjṛmbhita*) by the *ilattāḷam* cymbals (*tāla*);
and with the striking movements of his eyes, creating emotive expression,
he expands the delight of members of the audience.

**Figure 2.** *Ōṭṭantuḷḷal*, with mridangam and *tālam* accompaniment. Image credit: Sai K Shanmugam / Wikimedia Commons.

Three details are worth noting here in regards to the projection of Kerala performance culture into the stylized world of the *bhāṇa*. First, several unmistakable features of *oṭṭantuḷḷal* are invoked, including the mention of Malayalam (*keralabhāṣā*) in the first line. This seems to evoke Kunchan Nambiar's exclusive usage of Malayalam in order to distinguish his popular art form from the hybrid (Sanskrit-Malayalam) linguistic register of Cākyārkūttu (Raghavan 1947).[11] Second, the evocation of the erotic and comic sentiments (*śṛṅgāra* and *hāsya rasa*s) echoes the conventions of the *bhāṇa*, thus creating a resonance or alignment between these two art forms, one that was a survival of a classical Sanskrit tradition, and the other that would have been only recently invented by a celebrated Kerala poet for the purpose of popular entertainment. Finally, though the names of the drum and cymbal are generic Sanskrit terms, *mardala* and *tāla*, they resonate with the Malayalam names of the specific percussive instruments that are to be used in

[11] It is worth noting here the legend of why Kunchan Nambiar, a drummer of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam community, created *oṭṭantuḷḷal*. As the story goes, after being mocked by an actor for falling asleep while playing percussion during a Cākyārkūttu performance, he left the stage and decided to create a new art form (Arundhathi 2019: 46). We might thus observe yet another parallel between *bhāṇa* and *oṭṭantuḷḷal* in terms of its relationship to Cākyārkūttu—we thank an anonymous reviewer of this article for making this observation.

*oṭṭantuḷḷal*: the *maddaḷam*, a barrel-shaped drum similar to the mridangam but lacking the black paste that provides the mridangam with tonal isolation, and the *ilattāḷam*, a large cymbal that is specifically used in *oṭṭantuḷḷal* performance.[12] The humor of this verse, then, comes not from slapstick, satire, or ridicule, though such sentiments can be found elsewhere in the *Rasasadana*. Instead, there is an incongruity that is generated, ironically, by an unexpected cognitive congruity that arises when a modern form of Malayalam folk performance—one that the *bhāṇa*'s audience readily appreciates from everyday experience—appears within the elite, timeless literary space of the Sanskrit *bhāṇa*.

From these observations we might gather that one reason why we often don't get the jokes of Kerala *bhāṇa* writers is not because these plays were not funny, but rather because they were funny for people who were immersed in the culture of early modern Kerala. We simply lack the contextual apparatus to appreciate the jokes. This apparatus, we suggest, can be effectively generated through a performance-centered approach, one that utilizes the processes of metatextual communication found in the traditional performing arts of Kerala.

## 4. Ironic Modes in Kūṭiyāṭṭam

Let us therefore turn to our second methodological question, "How do the Kerala performance traditions present different kinds of humor?" Here, we focus particularly on techniques and modes of expression through which contemporary performers generate irony on stage, and how these processes relate to the everyday experiences of their audiences. By the term "irony" we mean not simply a joking text, but any cognitive incongruity that arises from various configurations of verbal and physical inconsistency within a shared knowledge system. Another example from the *Rasasadana* can help us begin.

Towards the end of the play, as the Viṭa wanders around the Keliyātrā festival, he finds himself near a stage where drumrolls can be heard, summoning people to an enactment of what he calls a *prabandha*. What exactly is the performance he sees? The description of the stage and the action suggests that it is Kūttu:[13]

*madhye dīpajvalanamadhure pārśvataḥ pāṇighastrī-*
*citrībhūte sarasahṛdayair bhūsarair bhāsurāgre | [em. bhūsurair]*
*pṛṣṭhe mārdaṅgikavilasite raṅgadeśe praviṣṭaḥ*
*spaṣṭākūtaṃ naṭayati naṭaḥ ko 'pi kaṃcit prabandhaṃ ‖* (*Rasasadana* 220)

The stage is rocking to the beat of the drum in the back,
in the middle is a pleasant shining lamp,
while on the side there are marvelous female musicians
and, at the front, distinguished Brahman connoisseurs of *rasa*.
Onto this stage an actor enters,

[12] On *maddaḷam* as typical drum used in Kathakaḷi, Kṛṣṇāṭṭam, and in some folk arts in Kerala, see Rajagopalan 2010: 80-87.

[13] We know of Kūttu enacted in Kodungallur (see, for instance, the reference to the famous flying scene in *Nāgānanda*, Kunjunni Raja 1964: 25). Today, Kūṭiyāṭṭam is also performed during the Kodungallur *utsavam*.

and enacts some sort of story (*prabandha*)
with clear expressions.

Kūttu, as depicted in this verse—and perhaps evoked through the punning description *spaṣṭākūta* (clear expressions)—was an early performative tradition of Kerala. It was connected with the emergence of *prabandha* in Kerala as a new literary form around the twelfth century, involving compositions in a mixture of metric and prose passages and generally meant to be recited or performed.[14] As with *oṭṭantuḷḷal*, Godavarma's audiences would have experienced the distinct irony of seeing a familiar, localized mode of theatrical performance placed in the timeless/placeless space of a Sanskrit *bhāṇa*.[15]

The modern styles of Cākyārkūttu, Naṅṅyārkūttu, and Kūṭiyāṭṭam (Figures 3-5) are all thought to have developed from Kūttu by the sixteenth century (see Devadevan 2020: 234-235).[16] Until the last century, and in some cases still today, these artistic traditions were part of the *kuladharma* or ancestral ritual obligations of the Cākyār and Nampyār castes of actors and drummers attached to major Hindu temples across Kerala. Especially resonant with the *bhāṇa* is Cākyārkūttu, a form of solo performance in which a male actor (Cākyār) takes the *prabandha* stories as point of departure and, through lengthy passages in Malayalam, explains and expands upon the Sanskrit verses from the *prabandha*.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Cākyārkūttu have a long history of using irony with intentional ambiguity (Nampūtirippāṭ 2001; Davis 2014; Shulman 2019; Mucciarelli 2019). As Davis observes (2014), Cākyārkūttu engages both in social critique and a sort of cathartic humorist escapism. Following Siegel (1987), Davis suggests that this apologetic effect is the primary constituent of humor in Cākyārkūttu, though there do appear to be additional factors involved. For example, in the *Puruṣārthakūttu*, there is a distinct modality with which a set of inversions are put in place and then activated as countermeasures in order to facilitate productive engagement between different social communities (see Davis 2014, Goren-Arzony 2019, and Mucciarelli 2022). Central to these inversions is the Vidūṣaka, the clown figure found in some Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances (e.g., *Nāgānanda, Subhadrādhanañjaya*, and *Tapatīsaṃvaraṇa*) and congruent to the solo protagonist of Cākyārkūttu, who is usually simply called the "Cākyār." The Vidūṣaka of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, like the Cākyār, has the liberty to chastize everyone and everything; there is no person, institution, or custom beyond his reach, and in his hands irony becomes a voice of dissent on stage. In this regard, the Vidūṣaka and Cākyār functionally overlap with the character of the Viṭa in the *bhāṇa* (see Devarajan 1988: 256-260).

[14] Today, *prabandhakūttu* is often used to refer to Cākyārkūttu. On the emergence of *prabandha* literature across early modern South India, see Shulman 2021.

[15] In the next verse, we find that this *prabandha* tells the *Dārikavadha* myth of Goddess Kālī slaying the demon Dārika, popularly told throughout Kerala (see Caldwell 2001). Curiously, while no such *prabandha* exists in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam tradition, this is one of the central myths associated with the Bhagavathy temple in Kodungallur and performed in the ritual dance-drama tradition of Mudiyettu, which is also inscribed (in 2010) as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and is further reflective of Godavarma's localized vision.

[16] On the historical developments of Kūttu and Kūṭiyāṭṭam, see, among others, Gopalakrishnan 2011, Kunjunni Raja 1964. On Naṅṅyārkūttu, see Moser 2008.

**Figure 3**. Naṅṅyār Kūttu performed by Indu G., Nepathya Centre for Excellence in Koodiyattam, 2017. Image credit: Elena Mucciarelli.

**Figure 4.** Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance of Bālivadham by Nepathya at the 17th World Sanskrit Conference, Vancouver, Canada, 2018. Image courtesy of the Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia.

Moreover, both Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Cākyārkūttu feature irony as a cognitive tool to articulate a fluid reality, to the extent that even mythological stories become phenomena to be reinterpreted through an irreverent glance. The result is a disruption of the process of identity creation within the traditional institutions of socialization in Kerala. Here, we highlight two aspects of performance where this cognitive process takes place: the construction of the body and the nonverbal language expressed through this body. Both are evoked within Godavarma's *Rasasadana*, and have therefore been central to our method of transcreation.

**Figure 5.** Cākyārkūttu performance by Sreehari Chakyar, Nepathya Centre for Excellence in Koodiyattam, 2019. Image credit: Elena Mucciarelli.

Perhaps the most essential feature of any performance is the body of the actor, whose actions reveal the world in its sensorial and psychological nature, functioning as a medium for its representation. In analyzing the construction of the performing body within Kūṭiyāṭṭam, we may theorize it as a site of social identity but also as a space where irony is constructed. In the traditional education of Kūṭiyāṭṭam actors, the body is molded through disciplined training in order to become the principal medium of expression for the performer. Apart from the two copper drums (*miḻāvu*) and the hourglass-shaped *iṭakka* situated at the back of the stage, and (generally) a woman actor playing the cymbals on the left side, the theatrical space is empty. During the performance, the only objects on stage are a stool and the oil lamp placed at the front, between the actor and the audience—precisely as Godavarma points out in *Rasasadana* verse 220. The eyes of the audience, seeking out a *rasa* experience, fall upon the body of the actor (male or female), which is transformed into a complex web of significations through costume and makeup.[17]

[17] On the complex history of women performers in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, see Lowthorp 2016.

The actor's face is covered with a colored paste, lines and dots are painted on the cheeks, red and black to enhance the lines of the eyebrows and of the lips, and, in the case of male actors, a white rice paste frames the lower part of the face with a sort of rigid beard, conjuring up a mask-like appearance. Moreover, the many-layered dress comports the body into fixed patterns of movements and attitudes. The headgear as well as other elements of the costume are made of wood and a large piece of cloth is draped around the actor's waist. Both the makeup and the attire vary according to the kind of character that is performed and respond to a specific typology creating a stylized and controlled body.[18]

**Figure 6.** Vidūṣaka in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, performed by Margi Madhu Chakyar, scene from Nāgānanda (with Nepathya Rahul Chakyar), Nepathya Centre for Excellence in Koodiyaṭṭam, 2013. Image credit: Elena Mucciarelli.

At the same time, the actor builds on the aesthetic of excess of this regulated body to afford a space in which to play with the social rules. The distancing from a quotidian, normative representation of the human figure is to be interpreted in the context of the mythological stories that are enacted, but it functions also as a cognitive device that exercises irony as an instrument of social critique. The Vidūṣaka (Figure 6), with white stripes and red dots painted on his chest evoking tantric practices, has a peculiar, large, and soft hat that lies asymmetrically on his head and ends in a hanging tuft (not visible due to the angle of the image). The quasi-personified hat acts as a *persona muta* (a kind of silent sidekick) with which the Vidūṣaka constantly plays, as much

[18] An example of such a typology is the *paccaveṣam* for the heroic characters or the *kattiveṣam* for the demonic ones. For more on the *veṣam* in Kerala theatrical tradition, see Zarrilli 2000 and Rajagopalan 2000.

as he plays with the *yajñopavīta* (sacred thread worn by upper castes)—a subtle act of irreverence that challenges the socio-religious conventions and power imbalances of caste. Similarly, within *Rāmāyaṇa* plays, the demoness Śūrpaṇakhā is depicted as a grotesque, scary figure with pointy breasts, the body painted entirely in black, and wearing a giant hat.[19] Her costume and movements are meant to evoke a despicable character. The audience might sneer at her in the first part of the story when she angrily recalls the behavior of Rāma, but in the second half of the performance, when the demoness comes back on stage covered in blood, her body mutilated by Lakṣmaṇa, this derision or scorn becomes silent. Through the distance created at the beginning, the performance can foreground a woman's voice that challenges social taboos and pushes back against the stereotypical representation of women through the testimony of her own demise.

The second aspect we want to consider here is the body language (*āṅgikābhinaya*) of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. This has developed into a full-fledged linguistic code, captured in a Sanskrit manual called the *Hastalakṣaṇadīpikā*, through which gesture, dance, facial expression, posture, and movement are used to signify lexemes as well as morphological elements, such as Sanskrit or Malayalam case endings. Taking place next to this complex gestural communication is verbal acting (*vācikābhinaya*), consisting of an oral rendition of the Sanskrit verses and prose passages of a drama text.[20] As different as they are, these two modalities of recitation, *āṅgika-* and *vācikābhinaya*, work together in Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances to deliver the meaning of the text.[21] And it is by taking advantage of this multimodal delivery system that the actor generates humor on stage—by producing a double narration in order to provoke a laugh that, as Margi Madhu Chakyar eloquently explained during a conversation about the different modes of humor, is supposed to come "from the mind and not from the mouth."

Whereas Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance is predicated upon both gestural language and verbal recitation, Cākyārkūttu relies mainly on *vācikābhinaya*. The body language changes according to the different characters impersonated by the actor, who draws from the repertoire of stylized performance (*nāṭyadharmī*), but their actions are not as regulated as we find in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, and gestural communication is mostly left to subjective interpretation. Instead, in Cākyārkūttu we find a greater emphasis on extensive expository discourse, called *vācika*, through which the actor explains the meaning of the drama text. Thus, in Cākyārkūttu, the generation of humor (*hāsya*) is more explicit, more open, and developed, while in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the actor must communicate irony principally through gesture and physical expression. As such, the development of humor in Kūṭiyāṭṭam depends strongly on knowledge resources that are implicitly available to the audience.

To understand how humor is gesturally communicated in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, let us quickly move away from our *bhāṇa* and instead consider the performance of a verse found in the

[19] According to South Indian versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the demoness Śūrpaṇakhā turns herself into a beautiful woman, Lalitā, to approach Rāma in the forest, but she manifests her demonic form once Rāma dismisses her. On the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage, while a female actor plays Lalitā, a male actor plays Śūrpaṇakhā. This distinctively gendered role division is just one of the many aspects that make Śūrpaṇakhā a unique role in Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

[20] The prose passages are in Malayalam and are reserved for the Vidūṣaka; the only other prose passage is that of the so-called Nampyār Tamiḻ, still performed today in the performance of Aṅgulīyāṅkam, from Act Six of the *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*.

[21] The terms *āṅgika-* and *vācikābhinaya* can be traced to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata (Bansat-Boudon 1989-90).

*Aśokavanikāṅkam* ("The Aśoka Grove Scene"), the fifth act of Śaktibhadra's *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*, a *Rāmāyaṇa* play datable to the ninth century. Rāvaṇa has kidnapped Sītā and brought her to Laṅkā, but laments the fact that Sītā can only think about Rāma's hermitage, although she is surrounded by the much more beautiful landscape of Rāvaṇa's famous Aśoka grove. He says to her, "Here there are indeed plants that come from the abode of the gods." And further:

> *ete svargavibhūṣaṇaṃ viṭapino mandākinīrodhaso*
> *dhīraṃ paśyati devabhartari mahīṃ netuṃ mayonmūlitāḥ |*
> (*Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi* 5.24ab)
>
> These trees are an ornament to heaven!
> And as Indra, the king of the gods, kept watching,
> I uprooted them from the shores of the heavenly Gaṅgā
> to bring them to earth.

This verse is performed during the final day of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance of *Aśokavanikāṅkam*, and it is rendered on stage by the actor playing Rāvaṇa. He first uses *vācikābhinaya* to recite the verse, followed by a rich elaboration of the meaning of the verse through gestural language, referred to as *anvayam*. The verse thus becomes a short story within the story, in which the actor switches between playing the roles of Rāvaṇa and Indra. According to the acting manual for this play, the *āṭṭaprakāram*, the phrase *dhīraṃ paśyati*, the idea that Indra *kept on* looking, is to be shown and to be expounded upon by the actor. The way in which this expression is rendered adds a new layer of meaning to the verse: the actor uses the *mudrā* (gesture) for "eye" to depict Indra by drawing on the common shared mythological knowledge that Indra has a thousand eyes.[22] The god is so afraid of the demon that he is paralyzed, he cannot even run away. He stands there, but he has all of these eyes. And so, while trying not to look at the horrendous gesture of Rāvaṇa, he finds himself in trouble: no matter how hard he tries to cover his eyes, there are too many, and they are all over his body, even on his back! The actor communicates this to the audience by placing his hand with the *mudrā* for "eye" on his back (Figure 7). This is the way in which Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance communicates the subtle meaning of the phrase, *dhīraṃ paśyati*. The irony here is not declared explicitly, but rather is implied, playing on the knowledge resources that the audience is presumed already to possess through their awareness of the myth of Indra and Ahalyā. This pattern takes place quite often in Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance, and relies on generating rupture between the letter of the text and the capacity of the actor to embody two slightly different meanings at the same time—congruent with the verbal *śleṣa* that we observed earlier in Godavarma's benedictive verse of the *Rasasadana*.

[22] Venugopalan 2009: 441, "*miḻiccu irunnatē uḷḷū*." The verb *miḻikkuka* "to cast looks" is a denominative from *miḻi* "eyeball."

**Figure 7.** Performance of the phrase "*dhīraṃ paśyati*" from *Aśokavanikāṅkam* by Margi Madhu Chakyar of Nepathya Centre for Excellence in Koodiyattam, Moozhikkulam, 2008. Image courtesy of the National Library of Israel and the Israeli Science Foundation.

## 5. Transcreating the *Rasasadana Bhāṇa*

Keeping these two ideas in mind—the untranslatability of humor and the ability of performance to communicate subtle codes through the actor's body language—let us now ask how a performance-based "transcreation" might communicate the humorous dimensions of a work like the *Rasasadana Bhāṇa*. Through our collaboration with the Nepathya Centre for Excellence in Koodiyattam in 2020, we investigated how integrating traditional Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance techniques might allow us to move from a translation of texts to a translation of codes. We provide here an account of our research procedures and a summary of the results, while also reflecting on methodological questions raised in this process.

Due to travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, our research proceeded entirely through online collaboration. We involved the core Nepathya team (Margi Madhu Chakyar, Indu G., and their son Sreehari) not only in the design and production of the performance, but also in the translation and theoretical exploration of the text. Three questions were of central focus: How does Kūṭiyāṭṭam articulate irony, satire, wordplay, and other kinds of humorous content? What space does the actor have to interpret the textualized performance? And what are the particular genre-based and functional differences between Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Cākyārkūttu in the delivery of humorous content?


**Figure 8.** Margi Madhu Chakyar and Indu G., Nepathya Centre for Excellence in Koodiyattam, interview, December 7, 2020. Image credit: Sreehari Chakyar.

With Sreehari facilitating, filming, and editing the recordings, we invited Margi Madhu and Indu to conduct two online interviews. In preparation for these, we met with them several times to discuss general topics such as the peculiarities and historical development of Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Cākyārkūttu and their connection to the *bhāṇa*s of Kerala. In the formal interviews conducted on December 7 & 18, 2020 (Figure 8), we discussed various matters concerning the production of humor, including the possibility for women to express irony in Kūṭiyāṭṭam and the limitations that society, politics, and religious institutions impose on the artist. We asked them also to compare the role of the Viṭa in the *bhāṇa* to those of the Vidūṣaka and Cākyār in Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Cākyārkūttu.[23]

Both Margi Madhu and Indu felt that Cākyārkūttu was more capable of delivering a wide spectrum of ironic content through the medium of *vācikābhinaya*; the actor is more free in his movements, due to the light costume and to the fact that, as Margi Madhu put it, he functions more as a storyteller than a character. Moreover, the actor of a Cākyārkūttu performance is at liberty to connect, as he sees fit, purāṇic narratives to everyday life and to contemporary political or social issues. In this way, Margi Madhu explained, the audience's concentration is kept alive. In some sense, the actor functions as a scholar who unpacks the hidden meaning of a verse and offers a mirror to society. At the same time, it was very important for Margi Madhu to stress that the actor in Cākyārkūttu, like the Vidūṣaka character in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, is not a comedian—"not a clown," he insisted in English. Rather, while his words and actions might make the audience laugh, the larger, more important goal is to bring people to reflect.

Regarding the specific roles and functions of the Cākyār in Cākyārkūttu, the Vidūṣaka in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, and the Viṭa in the *bhāṇa*, we were curious to learn from Margi Madhu and Indu how irony is perceived from emic perspectives. The Sanskrit term *hāsya* is the general term used to describe humor, and can be traced back to the classical theory of *rasa*. This *hāsya* is taken to be

[23] On female roles in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, see Daugherty 1996, Rajagopalan 1997, Moser 2008, Lowthrop 2016.

aestheticized humor, in contrast to explicit kinds of jokes that generate an easy, "low-brow" effect, or *tamāśa*, which is not considered suitable within the Kūṭiyāṭṭam or Cākyārkūttu repertoire. Referring to the sharper and more caustic expressions that are sometimes deployed by a Vidūṣaka or Cākyār, Indu G. used the English term "black humor," that becomes a calque in Malayalam: *kaṟuttŭ hāsya*. This ironic mode of speaking may also be called *cākyārpole bhāṣa* ("to speak like a Chakyar"). This last expression offers an insight into the self-representation of the Chakyar community as well as the localized and socially circumscribed understanding of humor production.

The third topic of our conversation with Margi Madhu and Indu concerned the *Rasasadana Bhāṇa* itself, since Godavarma's text does not appear to have been intended for performance as Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Nevertheless, in reading the composition, both felt that the texture of the drama, the ironic attitude of the verses, and the choice of images did indicate the influence of Kūṭiyāṭṭam and, even more so, of Cākyārkūttu. Following their intuition, which is corroborated by Devarajan's study (1988), we asked Margi Madhu and Indu to apply some of the techniques of the two art forms to some selected verses from the *Rasasadana*. In the initial phase of the production process, during which the *Rasasadana* text was converted from script to performance, it became evident that the texture of the story and the style of the text were calling for different types of theatrical realization. In particular, we observed how some verses could more readily be performed through a *vācika* discursive style more fitting to Cākyārkūttu's verbal storytelling, rather than physically and gesturally acted out (*āṅgika*). We read together some of the verses that Madhu felt were suitable for this kind of *vācika* performance, and he demonstrated how he might interpret them. Consider, for example, the following verse:

*vrīḍāparaśvadhavibhinnakaṭākṣakāṣṭhair*
*mandasmitena ca mukhoditamārutena |*
*saṃdhukṣya rāgadahanaṃ yuvacittakuṇḍe*
*taddhīratām ayam iyaṃ havir ājuhoti ‖* (*Rasasadana* 93)

With firewood that is her glance, cut by an axe that is their modesty,
And with a with a gently blown puff of wind—that is, the words from her mouth—
This lady lights the fire of burning passion
in the sacrificial altar that is the young man,
and makes an offering of his composure.

The metaphor that runs through the verse can open up into a double narration that deals with the social and ritual practices of Brahmans and the motifs of seduction, beauty, and, ultimately, falling in love. In his Malayalam rendition of the verse, Margi Madhu exploited both narrative lines by challenging the purpose of Brahmanical rituals (a common theme for Vidūṣaka and Cākyārkūttu) and expounding upon the rules and stereotypes that regulate sexual behavior and femininity in contemporary Kerala society. Margi Madhu unpacked the verse through a combination of semantic and syntactic analysis using a method of intercultural recontextualization that is remarkably similar to what translators do. That is to say, the Kūṭiyāṭṭam or Cākyārkūttu performance of this verse is an intersemiotic transcreation. For instance, Margi Madhu took the *kaṭākṣa*, the sidelong glance, and re-presented the movement of the eyes (to invoke Ramanujan's usage) within his Malayalam interpretation of this trope to capture the specific, culturally coded meanings that are evoked by this term in Sanskrit literary culture.

For the purposes of stage performance, we asked the Nepathya team to select a verse that would allow for an *āṅgika*-based rendition that could then be brought to life in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam style. In the selected verse, the Viṭa describes a filthy, corrupt Brahman, a well-known trope in the repertoire of both Vidūṣaka and Viṭa. On the stage there was a single character impersonated by Margi Madhu Chakyar. He was accompanied by two *miḻāvu* drummers, Jinesh P. Chakyar and Kalamandalam Manikandan, with Kalanilayam Sreejith Sundaran playing the *iṭakka* and Indu G. marking the rhythm with the cymbals (Figure 9). The performance was digitally recorded and edited by Nepathya Sreehari Chakyar.

**Figure 9.** Staging of *Rasasadana Bhāṇa*, Nepathya Centre for Excellence in Koodiyattam, 2020. Image Credit: Sreehari Chakyar.

The physical features of the Brahman constituted a central point of reference for Margi Madhu's rendition of the character. He expounded upon the stink that comes from the Brahman's mouth and the reaction of the young girls who see him. Both were demonstrated using exaggerated and stylized gestures and facial expressions that communicated the emotive aspects of both narrative elements without words. Through performance, the concrete, visual and sensorial world is embodied and brought to life, thereby evoking emotive signs that are communicative for global audiences, no matter the target language. In relation to the visual rendition of the scene, the creation of the costume constituted another important step. Since *bhāṇa*s are not part of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire, there is no established costume for the Viṭa, and though there are some similarities in role and function between Viṭa and Vidūṣaka, for Madhu the costume of the Vidūṣaka was not a proper solution. We considered the possibility of using other similar characters as points of reference, such as the Śiva devotee Vasantaka from the performance *Mantrāṅkam*, blending in some elements of the Vidūṣaka costume. But in the end, Madhu decided to create an entirely new costume for the Viṭa (Figure 10) using indications supplied by Devarajan (1988: 234, 236).

**Figure 10.** The Viṭa in the *Rasasadana*, Margi Madhu Chakyar, 2020. Image Credit: Sreehari Chakyar.

Here is the verse that was performed:

*durgandhaṃ daśaneṣu mūrtam iva yo dhatte cirāt saṃcitaṃ*
*kṛṣṇaśvetam alaṃ malaṃ malinatā pātraṃ ca vastraṃ kaṭau |*
*jātasvedaparāgadhūsaratanur dūrīkṛto yauvataiḥ*
*kāmabhrānta itīrito dvijasutaḥ so 'yaṃ samāgacchati ||* (*Rasasadana* 230)

He's got a stink in his teeth that's been built up
for so long that it's like it's alive,
The dirty cloth around his ass is a vessel for filth,
with black and white excretions.
His body has turned grey from the powder he uses for his sweat.
So the girls keep their distance,
And call this son-of-a-Brahman Kāmabhrānta—"Sex Maniac"!
And that's just what he is, that fellow coming here.

Margi Madhu's performance of this verse drew upon the traditional mode of rendering Sanskrit verses in Kūṭiyāṭṭam (see Moser 2008). First, he recited the entire verse, after which he represented the same verse through gestural performance (Figure 11). Then, he gesturally elaborated on various parts of the verse to eludicate further meanings (*anvaya*) to the audience. Finally, he recited the complete verse again, while simultaneously providing the gestures.

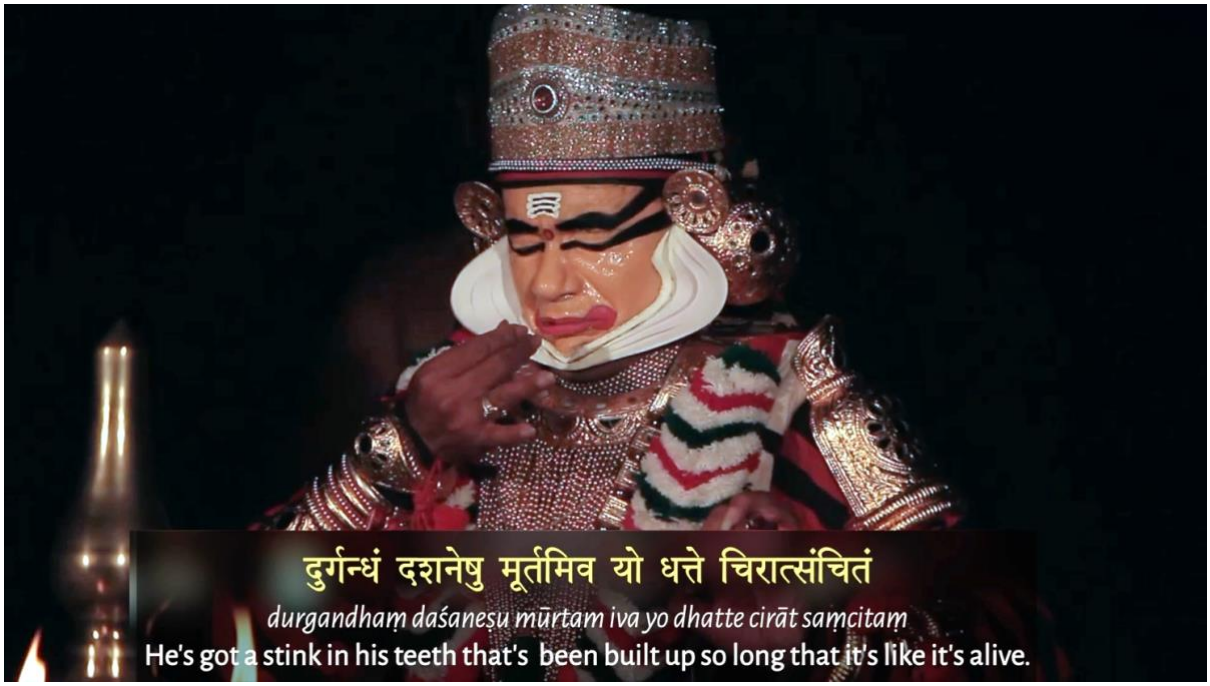


**Figure 11.** Margi Madhu Chakyar performing the "Kāmabhrānta" verse, 2020. Image Credit: Sreehari Chakyar.

Perhaps the most critical moment is found in the last line, the name "Kāmabhrānta." We had initially translated this as "tormented by lust," but the Nepathya team suggested instead the more provocative "Sex Maniac." We felt compelled by their translation, not only because overt sexuality is often a site of traditional Kerala humor, but also considering the darker psychology of sexual predation that this term evokes. In his *āṅgika* depiction of the name Kāmabhrānta, Margi Madhu took recourse to a number of conventional gestures and facial expressions. In the gestural language of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, *kāma* (love, but also sexual pleasure, desire) is signified by a series of arrows that pierce the sternum of the lover, making the person slowly lose his consciousness and faint. Anyone struck by *kāma* comes very close to death, and this state is signified through certain conventionalized facial movements.

In the case of this verse, however, there is a twist that generates the cognitive incongruities—that is, the irony—that form the core of its humorous effect. The hand gestures remain the same, the arrows are cast, they hit the Viṭa, but the face of the actor does not express any sign of fainting. It tells a rather different story. The actor, who had been acting the role of the lustful Brahman, immediately switches to portraying the girls who shun him, and his face instead communicates *their* aversion at the deviant (*bhrānta*) nature of this Brahman's particularly disgusting form of passion (Figure 12). The actor thus simultaneously embodies the man hit by the arrow of love, the girls who shun him, and the social norm that defines him. Using Attardo's (2017) terminology, we are shown two different, incongruous "scripts" regarding *kāma*—one that plays on a conventional, erotized understanding of the desires and pleasures of sexual attraction (the arrow in the heart), but that is immediately juxtaposed with the disgust and deviancy of *kāma* out-of-control. The verse ultimately conveys a social commentary, quite common in the early modern Kerala *bhāṇa*s, about the hypocritical degeneracy of Brahmans who condemn but also participate in the cultures of pleasure. However, Margi Madhu's performance communicates the physical irony of this scene even to audiences who might not have access to the knowledge resources needed to appreciate this social critique—something that a simple textual translation of *kāmabhrānta* as "tormented by lust" would not (Figure 13).

**Figure 12.** Kāmabhrānta's lust and the courtesans' aversion, performed by Margi Madhu Chakyar, 2020. Image Credit: Sreehari Chakyar.

Through just this one brief example, we are able to see how Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance enhances the translatability of humorous texts, since the performance itself is seeking to do what modern translators do: to traverse a range of registers so that the actor is able to enact two modes of representation, thereby creating (or rather transcreating) the cognitive incongruities that are the basis of humor.

**Figure 13. The** Viṭa's social commentary, performed by Margi Madhu Chakyar, 2020. Image credit: Sreehari Chakyar.

## 6. Conclusions

This article represents an initial attempt at a performance-based "transcreation" of a nineteenth-century comedic monologue, the *Rasasadana Bhāṇa* of Godavarma Yuvarāja. The most significant value offered by the juxtaposition of textual translation with Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance, as we have found, is the capacity of this traditional art form to effectively communicate, for target audiences in any language, the otherwise untranslatable cognitive incongruities that are fundamental in the production of irony. We can laugh, in other words, at Godavarma's ironic depiction of the "Kāmabhrānta" Brahman after watching Nepathya's performance in ways that are not necessarily possible simply by reading the English translation. But can we do this with the rest of the play? And is it possible to transcreate other kinds of texts, following the methods we have proposed? There are, of course, basic questions of feasibility and practicality. We have chosen a theatrical work, which is already designed to be staged; other texts, such as ritual manuals or philosophical expositions, are not so easily integrable into the world of performance. Additionally, the Nepathya ensemble took a modest 20 minutes to perform the selected verse; keeping in mind that the *Rasasadana Bhāṇa* contains 240 verses, a complete performance would be hard to imagine today, both for performers and for audiences.[24] We are thus left again walking on Ramanujan's "tightrope" between absolute fidelity to the source-language text and the needs and interests of readers in the target-language.

How, then, might we implement a performance-centered transcreative approach? The tradition itself offers a possible way forward. Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances, even in the past, have never been meant to present an entire dramatic piece (Gopalakrishnan 2011b; Shulman 2016, 2022), but rather, strive to highlight and enhance the audience's appreciation of a small portion of a

[24] It is true that some Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances may go on for 41 days or even longer—but these tend to be works with religious value and with elaborate performance-manuals that explain how these lengthy performances should be conducted.

scene or act within the larger work. And so, specific metatextual or hypertext devices like flashbacks or allusions are regularly integrated into the performance in order to help audiences grasp the intricacies and expanse of the text as a whole. The same idea can be adapted to the two-dimensional space of a textual translation, if we make use of additional dimensions offered by digital technologies. The dynamic structure of online web-pages, for example, provides the power to generate the same kind of intertextual referentiality that live actors employ in the on stage. In order to "transcreate" a text, one need not, therefore, produce a complete performance that a reader must watch; rather, we might imagine embedding digital recordings of performances of selected segments, verses, or scenes in an online electronic platform, alongside the text and its translation. Using HTML or other interactive formatting, additional annotations, resources, references, and paratextual apparatus can be placed alongside these performance clips to further enhance the reader's understanding of humor and other seemingly "untranslatable" aspects of Sanskrit texts. The same kinds of technologies can likewise enable untrained audiences to appreciate the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performers' "body language." Our future work will seek to further develop such online avenues for staging, delivery, and global reception of transcreated Sanskrit theater in collaboration with the traditional culture-bearers of Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

# Appendix: "Kāmabhrānta" Episode, *Rasasadana Bhāṇa* of Godavarma Yuvarāja, *ad* 229-234

**Sanskrit Text** (Shivadatta and Parab 1893: 60-61):

**viṭaḥ]** tad idānīṃ candanamālāyā mandiraṃ praty avilambitam eva gantavyam | (*iti parikramya |*) aye ko 'yaṃ daṇḍapāṇir agrato duḥśakunībhavati | (*vibhāvya |*)

ā jñātam |

durgandhaṃ daśaneṣu mūrtam iva yo dhatte cirāt saṃcitaṃ
kṛṣṇaśvetamalaṃ malaṃ malinatā pātraṃ ca vastraṃ kaṭau |
jātasvedaparāgadhūsaratanur dūrīkṛto yauvataiḥ
kāmabhrānta itīrito dvijasutaḥ so 'yaṃ samāgacchati || 230 ||

eṣa hi

saṃbhāṣaṇair amitasītkṛtahāsagarbhair
ambūkṛtaiḥ svaparavarṇanadūṣaṇāḍhyaiḥ |
duḥkhākaroti puruṣaṃ muhur agradṛṣṭam
āvartitair adhikanīrasabhāvayuktaiḥ || 231 ||

api ca |

kruddhaḥ praharati sarvān pitaraṃ vā mātaraṃ pitṛvyaṃ vā |
saṃprati kaṃ prati ruṣṭo na hi jāne daṇḍabhṛt prahartum ayam || 232 ||

tad enaṃ duḥsahāsannasthitim asaṃbhāṣyaiva gamanaṃ sāṃprataṃ sāṃprataṃ mama | (*iti tadupāyānveṣī pārśvato vilokya |*)

imām aśvatthavedikām antarākṛtvā vāmanībhūtas tiṣṭhāmi | (*iti tathā kṛtvā |*)

aye gato 'yaṃ duḥśakunībhūto dvijasutaḥ | amuṣya darśanāj janiṣyamāṇam aśubham apākartuṃ manāg iha sthitvā punar gamanam ācaritavyam | ity aśvatthavedikāyāṃ kṣaṇam āsitvā sahasaiva prasthitaḥ | aye puṇyadarśanā kācana bālataruṇī manaḥśalyam apākartum iva niyatyā mama dṛṣṭipathe preryate | (*saharṣaṃ vilokya |*)

eṣā hi

dhavalakusumadhāriṇī mṛdulahasitakāriṇī
viśadavimalahāriṇī vividhalalitahāriṇī |
taruṇahṛdayahāriṇī madanajaladhitāriṇī
vipulajaghanabhāriṇī dviradamadhuracāriṇī || 233 ||

mama suśakunībhūyābhigacchati |

kiṃ ca |

suvarṇakumbhāvamṛtena saṃbhṛtau
prakāśayantī puratāḥ payodharau |
sitāṃśukāntānanakāntir aṅganā
sitāṃśukā netramudaṃ prasūyate ‖ 234 ‖

aye saṃnihiteyam | bhadre kasyacit kāryasya gauraveṇa gacchāmaḥ | tad idānīm asaṃbhāvanāparādhaḥ kṣantavyaḥ |

***kiṃ bravīṣi*** | ārya bhavatu | avalambitam eva mannayanacakorikāyās tvadānanacandracandrikāsvādaḥ iti |

bhadre tathaiva | (*iti parikramya* |) …

## English Translation:

**[The Viṭa:]** I should now go to Candanamālā's house right away. (*Walking around the stage.*)

Hey! Who is that guy up ahead of me, who's carrying a staff and looking like a bad omen? (*Showing that he has figured it out.*) Oh, I know!

230. He's got a stink in his teeth
that's been built up for so long that it's like it's alive,
The dirty cloth around his ass is a vessel for filth,
with black and white excretions.
His body has turned grey from the powder he uses for his sweat.
So the girls keep their distance,
And call this son-of-a-Brahman "Kāmabhrānta"—"Sex Maniac"!
And that's just what he is, this fellow coming here.

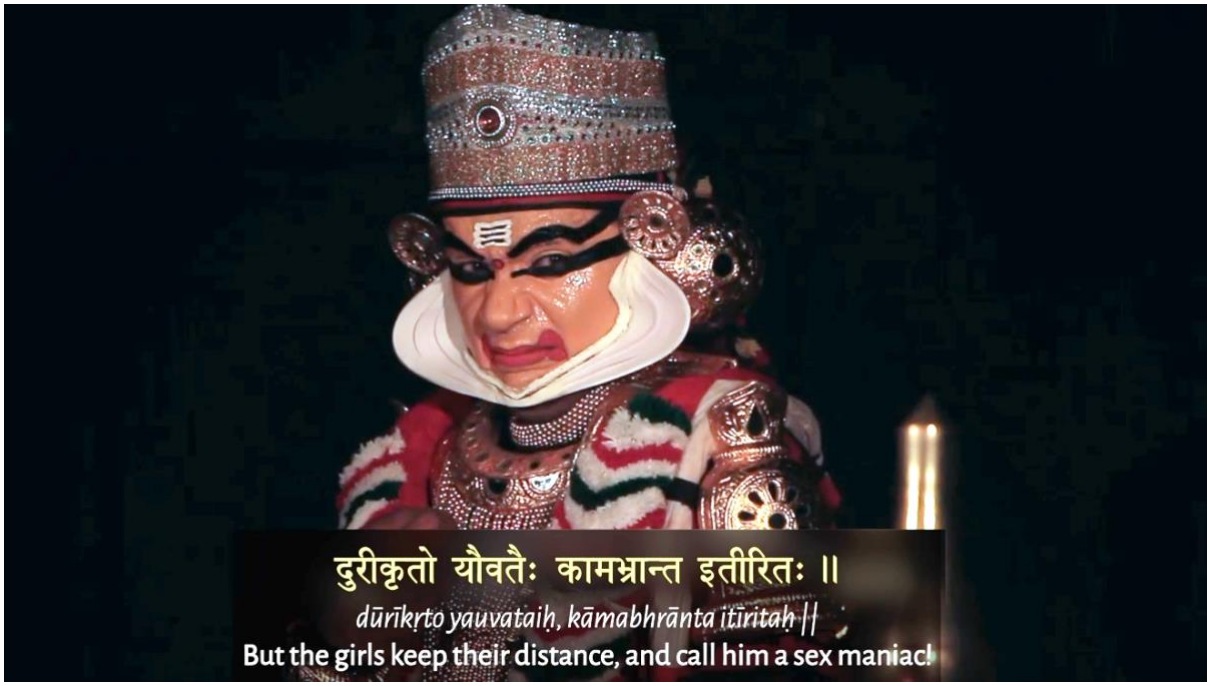


**Figure 14.** Kūṭiyāṭṭam Performance of Verse 230. *https://youtu.be/O63p8zXdvJs*

231. He's someone who will dampen the spirits
of any person who happens to come into his sights,
even for a moment,
By all the things he'll say,
teeming with endless sighs and snickers,
and soaked in spittle and abounding in awfulness,
As he talks about himself and others,
Rambling on and on, and delivering truly tasteless sentiments.

And also:

232. Angry, he beats up on everybody,
no matter if it's his mother, his father, or his uncle.
I have no idea exactly who he's angry at right now—
this fellow carrying a staff to beat people.

So I'd better get going right now! Yeah, I'll just move along, without chatting with him about the details about the bad situation he's got himself in. (*Looking to one side, trying to find another path.*) Oh great! He's left now, that Brahman's son who's acting like a bad omen.

Now in order to get rid of the bad energy I'm getting from seeing this guy, let me just stay here for a moment and then I'll get going. OK, I'm now going to sit for a minute on this stoop under the fig tree, and then, straight away, I'll be off.

Oh wow! Now this is quite the welcome sight, it's a beautiful young woman! It's as if fate is pushing her into my line of sight as a way to clear away the stinging that's in my mind. (*He looks at her eagerly.*)

This lady is:

233. Wearing white flowers, exuding gentle laughter,
wearing a garland that is bright and spotless,
she's so charming with her different flirtatious gestures.
She captivates the hearts of young men,
she has shapely legs that help you cross over the ocean of love,
and she moves gracefully, like an elephant.

She's come here as an auspicious blessing for me. What's more:

234. She displays her two breasts ahead of her,
golden pots filled brimming with ambrosia.
This young woman, all dressed in white, she's so pretty!
With that face that has the luster of the cool-rayed moon,
she delivers delight to my eyes.

Oh, now she's coming closer! My dear, I'm about to head off because there is a certain task that I have urgently to do. So please just excuse my crime of disrespect for now.

***What are you saying?***

"It's fine, Sir. These partridges that are my eyes have just instantly savoured the moonbeams from the moon that is your face."

That's perfect, my dear. (*He walks around the stage.*) …

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