

MELARI (KANALATTAM)

THE SPECIAL TRIBAL ART FORM IN PANIYA TRIBES OF WAYANAD

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Abstract

The Paniyan is a tribal community in Kerala lives in a group where their relatives come together. Tribal characteristics that are disappearing in today's social situation are needed to be preserved. Many customs and practices that the outside world may judge as superstition or immoral were not so at the time of their formation. They adopt traditional methods in customs and rituals. *Thudi* and *Chini* are indispensable musical instruments in all the cultural contexts of Paniyar's life. Tribal communities deeply involved in nature worship and ancestor worship also. It may consider as belief in spiritual beings. Paniyan performs *Kanalattam* in their hamlets (Ooru) only under special circumstances because it is an offering to their deities. A lot of preparations have to be made for this. The main purpose of Kanalattam is to perform emergency actions

Keywords: - Thudi, cheeni, Kiluvaram, Meleri, Kanalattam, Komaram

Introduction

To gain effective knowledge of our rich heritage, it is essential to have a thorough knowledge of tribal discourses. It is the need of the hour to record the tribal traits that embody the values that the outside world could not fully understand. Tribal characteristics that are disappearing in today's social situation are cultural characteristics that need to be preserved. Many customs and practices that the outside world may judge as superstition or immoral were not so at the time of their formation. All the tribal peoples of Wayanad have many such customs in one form or the other. Now is the time when tribal groups are facing challenges to survive and survive like never before. Their cultural life is given strength and continuity by the rituals formed following the tribal beliefs which the general society ignores as superstitions.

Objectives of the Study

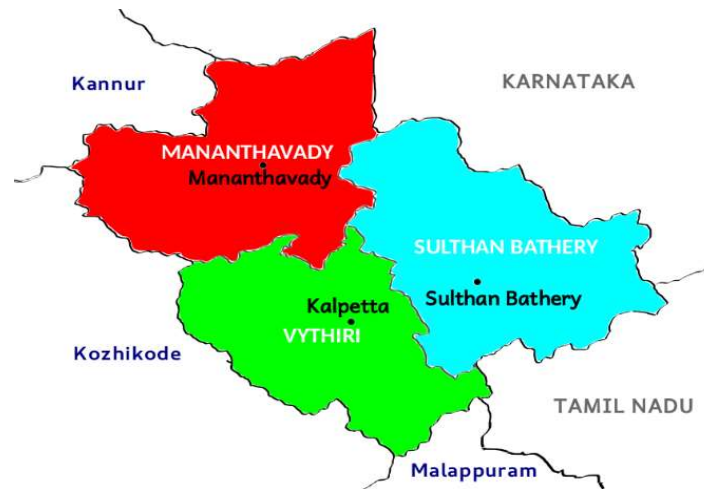
- To understand the cultural practice of Melari (Kanalattam) among the Paniyan tribes of Wayanad.

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- To find out if any factors influenced the encroachment on the socio-cultural identity of the Paniyan tribe.

Area of Study

This research area was in the Mananthavady taluk of Wayanad district in Kerala state. In Mananthavady block, the researcher has visited the following places for data collection: such as Kalleri mala colony in Vellamunda Panchayath and Perincehrimala in Thondernad Panchayath. The present study tries to analyze the traditional offering system of Paniya tribes in Wayanad district. Tribal culture envisages the indigenous practices and their interaction between deities and nature.



Map 1: Taluk Map of Wayanad District

Significance of the Study

Every single community in the world has gone through changes over time. There are several socio-cultural, political, and economic factors that may influence the changes in every community. Here the researcher is finding that the significance of the study is to make a document on cultural shift-influenced cognitive, behavioral, and lifestyle patterns of the Paniyan community and to check if any factors are influenced to encroach on the socio-cultural patterns among the community.

Methodology

This research is 'descriptive' in nature and the researcher adopted observation method followed by the fieldwork. The data are either quantitative or qualitative. The primary source of data was Paniya community and the secondary source of data is literature regarding socio-cultural patterns of the tribal community. The present study used interviews (formal or informal) and observation as research tools.

Social structure of Paniyan

The name *Paniyan* appears to have been evolved from the word *Pani* which in Malayalam, means work. Thus Paniyan is a worker or labourer. Luiz (1962, 218) considers that "the name Paniyar is a modified form of a Malayalam word *Panikkar* (Labourer)". In the Malayalam-English dictionary compiled by Herman Gundert, Paniyan is described as "a caste of cultivators in hilly districts" (1872, 567). Francis labels them as a Malayalee caste of agricultural labourers (1901, 172). Whatever may be the derivation of the term, the Paniyans eke out their livelihood by cultivation or by agricultural labour. They call themselves Paniyan and they are addressed and referred to as *paniyan* (male) and *panichi* or *paniyathy* (female) by others. The plural form of the term is *Paniyar*. The Paniyars are a tribal group that likes to live in a group where their relatives and their own people come together. They call their houses *Pire*. It is also called *Karumam* without a group of Pires. *Karumam/Karimam* is the most important element in the social hierarchy of Paniyar's life. *Chemmi* (Mooppan) is the leader of all the *Pires* in a region. Chemmi (Moopan) is the chief who presides over all the ceremonies concerning the Paniyars. Assistants *Koima* and *Karaima* have also been given the responsibility to help him. The roles of Chemmi are a mediator, traditional healer, sorcerer, sorcerer, and clairvoyant in the Paniya community.

Nowadays, in many hamlets, all this has been changed to a mere name. The community gives high consideration and respect to the elders and Karanavans in the lifestyle of Paniyars following the customs, local practices, tribal decisions and lower etiquettes. Paniyars embrace and follow all the cultural practices of the tribal life of Kerala. They adopt traditional methods in customs and rituals. *Thudi* and *Chini*² are indispensable musical instruments in all the cultural contexts of Paniyar's life. On all special occasions, the Paniyars are together dancing with their musical instruments Thudi and Cheeni, known as *Vattakkali*, a rhythmic dance in their all occasions like *Kathukuthal* (ear piercing), *Thirundukalyanam* (Puberty marriage), *Kettukalyanam* (marriage) and *death emergency* (Funeral ceremony). As of now, the Paniyar perform their traditional ritual and rites in their homes, accompanied by Cheeni and Thudi, using dance and songs as percussion.

²*thudi* (a small, drum-like instrument resembling a damru) *cheeni* (a pipe-like instrument).



Fig: 1 Thudi and Cheeni

Kiluvaram

Kiluvarams are the fundamental ideas that guide Paniyar culture and serve as the foundation for their daily existence. Kiluvaram is a set of laws and rites that encompasses the practices, beliefs, and rituals of the Paniyar people as well as the conditions of life that are disclosed through tales and revelations from gods and spirits.

Beliefs and rituals

Tribal communities deeply involved in nature worship and ancestor worship also. It may consider as belief in spiritual beings. Religion as belief in spiritual beings (Taylor, 1871). Religion was a cultural universal, because no known cultures were without such beliefs. Religion organized as belief in soul. Myths are verbal expressions. Each tribal society uses these languages to represent themselves in their tribal arts. It equalizes with nature and turns into an idol that is both a part of worship and the natural world. Occasionally, they take on the role of their gods. Typical tribal symbols and mythology include plants, trees, animals, and birds (totemic myth). The primal nature story (nature myth) is also a transformation of the cosmic elements, such as the sun, moon, stars, air, sky, fire, and water.

Paniyan society today has been largely hinduized. Before that, their deities were idols like Gulikan, Kali-Kuli, Kattu Bhagavathy, Mariyamma, Valliyuramma and Muthappan. Worship rituals are performed by putting some stones as symbols of God in any corner of the built-up areas, in the yard or under the tree. Several sacrifices and also worship of diverse animal Gods and Goddesses are feted though occasionally. Kuli, Kadu Bhagavadi are worshipped with great reverence by the members of this tribal group. Moreover, the Paniyan tribes also revere Hindu gods and goddesses. In some parts of the Paniyan village, the shrines of this deity have been built and offerings are being given to appease her. They also believe in spirits and worship natural objects to stay away from evil forces.

Kanalattam (Melari)

A person's culture is closely related to the environment they live in, the social conditions they create, the family environment they grow up in, and the knowledge they acquire. The influence of lifestyles, beliefs, physical conditions, and social position can be seen in it. The cultural traditions of the tribes are mainly survived through oral transmission. The tribal community had a large cultural repertoire consisting of myths, legends, sayings, incantations, and dance songs. The Paniyar are innately passionate about singing and dance. These kinds of arts are ingrained in their daily rituals and way of life

According to Tylor, primitive man had certain experiences: in his dreams, he engaged in various types of activities even while he was sleeping; he met his dead ancestors in dreams and had hallucinatory experiences about them and other beings while he was awake; he heard the echoes of his own voice; he saw his own reflection in ponds, pools, and rivers; and he failed to disentangle himself from his shadow. There must have been some unseen thing in him that must have escaped, unseen, making him dead. It was thus that the belief in such an unseen thing or power, which kept people alive when it was in them and made them dead when it left their bodies, emerged. Such a thing or power is called 'soul'. (1871)

Tribes worship all types of spirits, whether they are benevolent or malevolent. Their huts, villages, fields, and forests eagerly awaited them. The ancestral spirits claim worship from their descendants. They mediate between the tribesmen and the gods. It is also observed that the tribes have blended their beliefs and rituals with those of other faiths “. (Srivastava. 2021). The Paniya community continues to observe ceremonies and honor their ancestors. They have a belief in devils and ghosts. Some people use witchcraft as a coping mechanism for their fear. In order to cure illnesses, Paniyar also go to the sorcerers and healers among them.

Paniyar performs Kanalattam in their hamlets (Ooru) only under special circumstances; because it is an offering to their deities. A lot of preparations have to be made for this. The main purpose of Kanalattam is to perform emergency actions. Paniyars believe that the gods give happiness and sorrow. They are always afraid of ghosts. They perform many rituals to prevent ghosts from harming pregnant women. These ceremonies are *choodiyatt* and *muriyatt*. Preparations for Kanalattam in hamlets³ will start at dusk. There will be a lamp floor for lighting that is visible in any part of the hamlet's courtyard. This is for lighting the lamp for the ancestors in the evenings. If there is no more lamp floor it will be made for pooja purpose.

³ Hamlet (tribal colony, Ooru settlement)



Fig 2: Thara

This floor is polished and cleaned with cow dung. All the rituals of *Kanalattam* are performed on this floor. The visual objects brought by the hamlet residents to participate in the ceremony. *ari* (rice), *aval* (rice flakes), *malar* (popped rice), flowers, *Chandana thiri* (incense sticks), *thenga* (coconuts), *thorth* (white cloth), *chuvanna pattu* (red colour silk cloth), *vella mundu* (white dhoti), *kallumaala* (bead-necklace), *panam* (currency/coins), and *madhyam* (liquor/beverage) are all placed on a banana leaf in front of the floor.



Fig 3: Komaram with Red colour cloth (Pattu)



Fig 4: Kallumala

The *poojari* stands in front of it and prays in silence for some time. At this time, a few people in the hamlet start dancing in a circle with their *thudi* and *cheeni* to

rhythmic music. A number of people sit or stand around as spectators. The women of hamlet perform the paniya dance around this floor singly and later in two's and threes. Musical ensembles and dances: slowly and slowly, at a fast pace, the young and old people who are the spectators slowly dance and sing along with the dance troupe. At this time, the poojari⁴ recites mantras and prays with his hands on the heads of those gathered around him.

Arala Muttachi, Melapiranthan, Malakota Muthappan, Nagarumudi Thambai, Onthu Murian Thambai, Kaimurian Thambai, Malakkari, Kuttichaththan etc. are given the names of Paniyan's deities. While performing Kanalattam, one prays to each deity by performing rituals. *Melapiranthan* is prayed to by mixing turmeric in boiling water, but *Arala Muttachi* is invoked with red silk. In the case of Kanalattam performed when the vow is made in the name of *Kuttichathan*, alcohol is required.

People unknowingly join in amid the hallucinatory instrumental sounds of *Thudi and Cheeni*⁵. Here, we can see the unique unity of the tribal community. From within the freedom of their own being, they invoke God or deities or worship idols for the departed souls. They seem to reach a different state of mind as they dance for hours without getting tired. This self-forgetfulness of theirs is a form of self-realization.

Meanwhile, the *poojari* brings a *choottu katta* ⁶ a lamp that's been turned in front of the banana leaf is used to light the *choottu katta*. It is called *flambeau* by burning this bundled coconut dry leaf. This burnt-hot bundle is circled around the floor and participates circling the *thulasi thara* (holy place) and continues dance. Finally, he bows his head in front of the floor and recites the prayer. He prostrates to the ground in front of the floor following these steps. When the night is over, some people get tired and lie down in these places to rest. But some people continue to dance. At this time, preparations are being made for carrying out the *melaari* (kanalattam) on the ground floor.

During Kanalattam, dried jack wood logs are used as firewood. A fire that starts slowly burns and then spreads throughout the pile of wood becomes a bonfire. Kanalattam is performed in the coals of this wood. At this time the prayers begin invoking the ancestors, the dead, spirits and worshipping deities. For whom the offerings is being performed, mainly for them and their ancestors, the priest chants loud prayer mantras. When all the fire-wood is burned, the embers are placed in front of the floor in the yard. It will be about one person long.

⁴ Poojari- komaram/ velichappad

⁵ Musical instruments of Paniya tribes

⁶ Choottu katta- it is a bundle, which made through dried coconut leaves

After laying the embers, the next stage of burning begins. The wife of householder who conducts the *melaari* gives a bowl of betel leaves, areca nut and lime to the poojari. Later this betel pot is distributed to the elders of the settlement. For Pujari, the role of a *komaram*⁷ is next. Kanalattam is performed by the komaram by tying a red silk band. The komaram appears dressed in Red with their body smeared. He performs Kanalattam by tying a red silk fringe with *Chilambu* (Anklet) and *Aramani* (a sort of waist belt). These belts are studded with small curling bronze bells.

The komaram (Oracle) sat in red silk on the floor in front of the *thara*. Then he rubbed with a white cloth in 3 times over the embers. This is repeated two to three times. The householder takes liquor in a bottle and sprinkles it around the coals and gives the rest to the komaram. Then he drinks it as a *theertham* (holy water). After he gets up from the front of the floor and sweeps the embers with his hands and runs quickly over the embers. Then Komaram takes the hands of the people performing the ritual and moves forward and walks over the embers. Paniyars believe that if there are no wrongdoings, they will not get burnt. After that, someone from the votary's house, especially an elderly woman, will throw a white cloth over these fire pits two or three times. If this cloth gets burnt in high heat then kanalattam will not be done.



Fig 5: Melari Performance

Even the residents of Ooru, who were half asleep, got up at this time and started dancing around the embers in rhythmic movements. Then everyone together kicks these embers and continues the burning. To the rhythmic instrument of Thudi, all the settlements join hands and continue the dance in a circle. It continues until the heat of the embers is exhausted and the swing ends with the appearance of ashes. The komaram moves in and out of the courtyard and talks to the devotees. It is believed that the deity speaks through the komaram and delivers frenzied forecasts. Their language is often vague and difficult to understand. They often predict solutions to

⁷ Velichappadu means “one who reveals light” who is the mediator between a Deity at a Hindu Temple in Kerala and the Devotees. A Velichappadu is also known as “Komaram.”

problems put forward by the devotees. This ceremony lasts all night and ends at dawn with the priest blessing everyone's head.

Conclusion

The majority of the adivasis' cultural traditions are oral. There was a rich cultural platform of myths, stories, proverbs, incantations, and chants inside the tribal society. A person's environment, the social structures they establish, the familial setting in which they are raised, and the knowledge they gain all have a significant impact on their culture. It demonstrates the impact of social standing, physical attributes, and way of life. As a result, the influence of lifestyles, beliefs, physical conditions, and social position can be seen in it.

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Data source: Orators

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