

Songs of the Paliya: A Reflection of Tribal Identity

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Abstract

The paper focuses on songs used in the art form PaliyaNrittam by the Paliya community. Paliya is a tribe residing in udumbanchola and Peerumedutaluks of Idukki district, Kerala. Mainly the PaliyaNrittam is performed during the festival of ElathPalichiamma, the clan deity of the Paliya, which is performed in the Tamil month of Chitra. There are mainly five songs that we can see in PaliyaNrittam. Prayer Song, Worship Song, Clown Song, Mullaperiyar Song, NellsuKuthu Song. Major theme of the songs used in PaliyaNrittam is the daily life events, agriculture and clan deities. In this study the researcher examines the following areas: (i) Narratives and rituals in PaliyaNrittam (ii) Role of arts in various spheres of Paliya's life. (ii) The current state of tribal songs of Paliya community. All the information for this study collected through extensive field work. The songs used in PaliyaNrittam is a representation of their culture and traditions. There are very few people who know the songs and art forms of the Paliya people today. The changes in the culture and lifestyle of the Paliya people are also reflected in their art.

Keywords: Paliya Nrittam, Tribal Songs, Agriculture, Elath Palichiyamma, Oral Tradition, Cultural Preservation

1. Introduction

Art has always served as a fundamental medium through which humanity expresses its culture, beliefs, emotions, and thoughts. Since ancient times, art has functioned as a means of communication, inherently linked with nature and everyday life. With the emergence of collective living, humans began to consciously develop artistic forms reflecting their environment. Among tribal communities, art remains an inseparable aspect of existence, integrated into all stages of life from birth to death. Tribal arts initially emerged as worship of natural forces, ancestors, and supernatural powers, performed through rituals intended to protect communities from adversity and evil influences. Over time, these art forms evolved into channels for communication, expression, and social cohesion.

Music and dance occupy a central position in tribal culture, reflecting each community's distinct worldview and social identity. Through songs, dances, and visual expressions, tribal groups transmit beliefs, customs, and experiences across generations. Their songs often narrate myths, daily events, and spiritual concepts, while music accompanies rituals intended to invoke rain, fertility, and prosperity. As these traditions lack written scripts, they have been preserved through oral transmission.

The Paliya have retained distinct cultural expressions such as PaliyaNrittam, which features five principal songs—*Prayer*

Song, Worship Song, Clown Song, Mullaperiyar Song, and NelluKuthu Song—centered on themes of daily life, agriculture, and clan deities.

This study examines: (i) narratives and rituals in *PaliyaNrittam*, (ii) the role of art in the Paliya's socio-cultural life, and (iii) the current state of their tribal songs.

2. Research Problem

In the context of the present study, the research problem emerges from the rapid decline of traditional tribal songs and oral art forms of the Paliya community. The core research problem is the imminent disappearance of *PaliyaNrittam* songs, which traditionally served as carriers of cultural memory, agricultural knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and community identity. With changing socio-economic conditions, shifting occupations, loss of agricultural traditions, mainstream cultural influence, and decreasing interest among the younger generation, only a few elders now retain the knowledge of these songs — creating an urgent need for documentation and analysis.

3. Literature Review

Several scholars have conducted extensive research on Kerala's tribal communities and their cultural expressions. Edgar Thurston (1909) and Krishnannayer (1937) documented early ethnographic accounts of South Indian tribes, including the cultural

practices of the Paliyan community. Raghavan (1947) explored the folk plays and dances of Kerala, emphasizing the ritualistic and performative nature of tribal arts. Luiz's "Tribes of Kerala" and Mathur's (1977) "Tribal Situation in India" provided sociological insights into tribal life and their adaptation to modern society. Rajagopalan (2011) and MathirappalliManoj (2013) studied tribal art forms as living traditions that function beyond entertainment — as embodiments of memory, cosmology, agriculture, and social order. Kanjhiyar and Rajan (2000) compiled tribal art study specific to the Idukki region, while Susheela Devi (1990) documented the cultural practices of the Paliyans. These studies collectively highlight the cultural complexity and diversity of tribal performance traditions. However, despite these contributions, most works focus broadly on tribal life and culture rather than offering a focused analysis of individual song traditions like PaliyaNrittam. There is limited ethnomusicological and thematic analysis of specific songs used in Paliya performance rituals — particularly their agricultural, spiritual, historical, and sociocultural functions. Therefore, the present study builds upon these foundations while filling the need for a song-specific cultural analysis of PaliyaNrittam.

4. Research Gap

A research gap highlights what is missing in existing knowledge and justifies the necessity of the present study. While previous works have explored tribal culture, rituals, and artistic expressions in Kerala, focused academic inquiry into the specific

song traditions of *PaliyaNrittam* remains limited. Most earlier studies have offered broad cultural or anthropological overviews of tribal life but have not analyzed the **individual thematic functions of Paliya songs**, such as those related to prayer, worship, agriculture, history, and comic narratives. Hence, the present study seeks to fill this critical gap by focusing exclusively on the songs used in *PaliyaNrittam*, examining their meaning, purpose, performative function, and relevance in the contemporary cultural context.

5. Research Objectives

1. To document and analyze the traditional songs used in PaliyaNrittam.
2. To interpret the themes, narratives, and cultural significance embedded in these songs.
3. To examine the role of Paliya songs in preserving agricultural knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and social identity.

6. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and ethnographic approach to understand the cultural depth and lived experiences embedded in PaliyaNrittam songs. The study is qualitative and exploratory in nature, rooted in ethnographic field research with an emphasis on oral tradition documentation and cultural interpretation. The research was conducted among the Paliya tribal

settlements of Idukki district, specifically in Kumali, Chakkupallam, Anyartholu, Puliyanmala, Anakkara, and Painavu regions. Informants included AruviPaliyakkudi, IshwariAmmaChinnukutty and many other community members.

The data for this study were collected through a combination of qualitative methods, beginning with a 10-day pilot study that aimed to establish trust and rapport within the Paliya community. Following this, extensive fieldwork was carried out over a period of three months, from October to December 2018, involving repeated visits to multiple Paliya settlements to ensure comprehensive coverage and familiarity with community practices. The primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews, participant observation, oral narratives, and active participation in traditional performances, allowing for a deeper understanding of the cultural and ritualistic dimensions of *PaliyaNrittam*. In addition, secondary data were gathered from books, academic journals, folklore archives, and previous ethnographic studies related to the tribal communities of Kerala. This combination of primary and secondary sources ensured both authenticity and contextual depth in analyzing the songs and rituals of the Paliya community.

7. Discussion

The songs of *PaliyaNrittam* embody the cultural and symbolic essence of the Paliya community, serving as living archives of collective memory, agricultural wisdom, and spiritual

expression. These songs are more than performative components; they function as oral texts that educate, preserve identity, and transmit intergenerational knowledge. *PaliyaNrittam*, also known as *PaliyaAttam*, is a distinctive art form performed by the Paliya community of Idukki as part of their cultural and ritual life. While similar forms exist among other tribal groups in Kerala, such as the Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba of Attappadi, the Paliya version is unique in its language, symbolism, and thematic focus. The performance is primarily associated with the festival of *ElathPalichiamma*, the clan deity of the Paliyas, celebrated in the Tamil month of Chitra. After the harvest of pulses, the community dances before the goddess as an act of gratitude for the bounty received.

The dance consists of five major songs—*Prayer Song*, *Worship Song*, *Mullaperiyar Song*, *Komali (Clown) Song*, and *NelluKuthu (Harvest) Song*—each reflecting a distinct dimension of Paliya life, from devotion and livelihood to humor and historical consciousness.

The *Prayer Song* marks the beginning of the performance and is dedicated to Goddess Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge. The song invokes her blessings to preside over the performance and inspire both dancers and spectators:

ThayeSaraswathiye

DhayavullorIshwariye

The *Worship Song*, beginning with “Varerara...”, forms the centerpiece of *PaliyaNrittam*. It is sung as part of the rain dance ritual, offered to please the forest and mountain gods. This song is performed after sowing seeds or threshing paddy to thank the deities for a good harvest and to pray for future prosperity. The imagery of the song links nature and divinity, invoking mountains, clouds, serpents, spirits, and the clan goddess ElathPalichiamma. The rain cloud is symbolically compared to a whale resting atop the mountain, while the singer calls upon ancestral spirits, forest maidens, and the Naga king to bring fertility and protection to the land. Thus, the 'Varerara' song is a true reflection of the Paliya tribe's identity and serves as proof of their inseparable connection with nature. It is not only the Paliya tribe; tribal communities in general worship nature as their deity. This song is a classic example of the importance of ecology in the lives of the Paliya people."

Another important song is the *Mullaperiyar Song*, which reflects the historical consciousness of the Paliya community. It recounts their experiences during the construction of the Mullaperiyar Dam under British supervision. The Paliyas, who had little contact with the outside world, observed the project with awe and curiosity. The inclusion of this event in *PaliyaNrittam* demonstrates how colonial encounters became embedded in the

Thanthane Thane Nanne Thana
Thanthane Thane Nanne Thana
OorukuMerkaThekeDaivikulamMerke
Thanthane Thane Nanne Thana
Thanthane Thane Nanne Thana
AanavettakuPonaDhore
AatheNallalaveduth
AthukuMeleThandhipottu
ThandhivazhiVarukira...

The *komali song* (Clown Song) introduces a humorous and socially conscious element into the performance. It narrates the story of a cunning *Kangani* (labor agent) who deceives a young woman laborer through comical dialogue. The exchange, while amusing, subtly critiques caste-based discrimination and exploitative labor practices that once affected the Paliya community. The song goes as follows:

Poovukkal Vikutheda
Essandala Kangani
Essandala Kangani
Nammapokum Dessathile
Essandala Kangani
Essandala Kangani
Mottamandadi Daudika

Through this playful narrative, the *Clown Song* becomes both entertainment and social commentary. Along with that, we can observe the social system that existed in the past and how the Paliya tribes were treated within society. It serves as a clear example of the casteism and gender discrimination faced by the Paliya tribe in relation to the mainstream community. These issues are not confined to the past; even today, casteism and marginalization between mainstream and marginalized communities continue to exist in society.

The *NelluKuthu Song* (Harvest Song) concludes the performance, celebrating the agrarian life and communal labor of the Paliya people. It portrays scenes of *punam* (shifting) cultivation, where crops such as *keppa* and *nellu* are grown, along with pumpkin and corn as intercrops. After the harvest, the grain is shared equally among all families, and portions are offered to mountain gods and used in *Pongala* rituals to the goddess. The song, sung while pounding paddy, eases the rhythm of labor and emphasizes ritual purity:

Kuthadi Kuthadi Kuruvamma

Kuninjhu Kuthadi Kuruvamma

Aashu, Aashu, Aashu, Aashu

Pachanelladi Pavizhanelledi

Pathu Kuthedi Kuruvamma...

The *NelluKuthu Song* thus reflects the tribe's deep bond with the land and their belief in the sacred reciprocity between human labor and divine blessing.

Taken together, the songs of *PaliyaNrittam* encapsulate the community's worldview—one where agriculture, faith, humor, and history are interwoven into a single cosmological fabric. They transform daily experiences into sacred expression, making art a living form of worship and memory. However, these oral traditions are now endangered due to modernization, linguistic erosion, and the declining participation of younger generations. Only a few elders retain authentic knowledge of these songs, underscoring the urgency of preservation to safeguard this living heritage and ensure its transmission with dignity and authenticity.

8. Findings and Recommendations

The songs of *PaliyaNrittam* function as vital oral repositories of the community's history, agricultural practices, spirituality, and collective social memory. Each song—*Prayer*, *Worship*, *Clown*, *Mullaperiyar*, and *Harvest*—embodies a distinct aspect of tribal life, encompassing devotion, livelihood, humor, casteism and even subtle forms of resistance. Among these, the *Varerara* worship song holds a central place in the tribe's ritual identity, symbolizing ecological harmony and the invocation of divine forces. The *Mullaperiyar* song reflects a strong sense of historical consciousness by preserving memories of colonial-era

events that shaped the community's lived experiences. Through the *clown* song, we can see the social system that existed in the past and how the Paliya tribes were treated within society. The *Nellukuthu* song is the classic example of their daily livelihood practices. Themes of agriculture and nature dominate the repertoire, reinforcing the inseparable relationship between land and livelihood. However, the oral transmission of these songs is now critically endangered, with only a few elders preserving authentic knowledge. This decline is largely attributed to the forces of modernization, cultural assimilation, linguistic erosion, and shifting patterns of economic dependence.

There is an urgent need to document *PaliyaNrittam* songs through comprehensive audio-visual archiving, prioritizing tribal elders as the primary custodians of traditional knowledge. Incorporating these songs into community-based education programs and tribal cultural centers can facilitate their transmission to younger generations. Collaboration with folklore academies, cultural ministries, and anthropological institutions is essential for formal recognition and systematic preservation. Efforts should emphasize community-led cultural revival initiatives rather than externally driven or exploitative interventions. Creating intergenerational learning spaces within the community, where elders actively mentor the youth, would further strengthen cultural continuity. Additionally, policy-level support and heritage safeguarding programs are needed to recognize *PaliyaNrittam* as an

intangible cultural asset. Collectively, these measures are vital to prevent the irreversible loss of this oral tradition and to ensure its preservation with dignity and authenticity.

9. Conclusion

This is a study based on the songs used in the art form of Paliyanrittam of the Paliya tribe of Idukki district. Most of the time tribal art is based on the life, environment, knowledge and other aspects of the tribal people. Various factors such as changes in living conditions and changes in ritual practices have led to the disappearance of tribal art footprints among tribal peoples. In the past, the main livelihood of most tribal groups was agriculture, forest resource gathering and hunting. But in the present situation, the main source of livelihood of tribal people is daily wage labour. Therefore, agricultural songs and agricultural dances are slowly disappearing from tribal communities. The same changes can be clearly seen in tradition and rituals. The influence of the Tamil tradition is more visible among the Paliya tribes. In tribal songs we can see the influence of Tamil and Malayalam apart from the native tribal language. There are very few people who know the songs and art forms of the Paliya people today. The changes in the culture and lifestyle of the Paliya people are also reflected in their art. Even their language is unfamiliar to the new generation. When it comes to art, most are on the brink of decay or extinct. If the songs are taken, there is a situation where it is not possible to tell clearly what is the subject of the songs, apart from hearing it orally. Only a few

individuals have significant knowledge of Paliya songs. The elders are of the opinion that the new generation is not interested in it. At present, nothing has been done to preserve the old songs. Tribal songs are contextual and the fact that the contexts or conditions for singing such songs are not among them today is the main reason why the songs of the Paliya people have died out. Other factors also nurtured it.

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