

Mannankoothu : Performance and Songs

Mannan Koothu is a traditional ritualistic dance performance of the Mannan tribal community in Kerala, deeply rooted in the epic tale of Kannaki and Kovalan. More than a performance, it is a living expression of the community's collective memory, spiritual beliefs, and oral storytelling practices. Passed down through generations, Mannan Koothu blends dramatic narration, symbolic costumes, music and its rhythm.

Mannan-Koothu is a traditional cultural dance performance of the Mannan community. The performance combines expressive movements with Mannan-Koothu songs, accompanied by traditional instruments and accessories.

The stories enacted in Mannan-Koothu are based on the legendary tale of Kannaki and Kovalan. However, the Mannan community's version of the narrative shows slight variations from the Silappathikaram, the classic Tamil Sangam epic from which the story originates. Through rhythmic songs, vibrant dance, and symbolic gestures, the Mannan people preserve and retell this ancient story in their own distinct cultural form.

In the earlier days, the community performed Mannan-Koothu every week under the guidance of the Kaani or chieftain within their hamlets. It was an important part of their social and cultural life, bringing the community together through music and storytelling. Today, Mannan-Koothu is performed mainly during annual festivals such as Kaalayootu and Pongal, or on special occasions, including the passing of prominent community members.

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Mythological Origin of Mannankoothu

According to the beliefs of the Mannan community, Mannan-Koothu was founded by two ancestral brothers, Panchampoolan and Periyankan. Guided by Poolappan Poolan Kaani, the brothers approached two sisters, Valuvakotha and Valuvachakki, who were known for their mastery of the art of Koothu. Many had tried to learn from the sisters before but had failed. The sisters agreed to teach the brothers, but with a condition — only one could be taught the art directly. As a result, the elder brother, Panchampoolan, learned within the gurukulam, while Periyankan learned the craft from outside.

After the training, the sisters gave the brothers a test. They were asked to demonstrate their learning by causing a tree to wilt and burn. Panchampoolan could wilt the tree, but Periyankan, with his focused gaze, set it ablaze. Impressed by their devotion and skill, the sisters blessed them both.

The brothers later returned to their hamlets and shared their knowledge with their people. It is believed that they formed the rhythm, structure, and style of Mannan-Koothu, passing it down through generations of the Mannan community.

Costume and Makeup in Mannankoothu

Mannan-Koothu features different types of characters, including male, female, and comedian roles. Traditionally, only men performed in the Koothu, with male performers also taking on female roles. In recent times, however, this has begun to change — elderly women and young girls have started participating, marking a shift in tradition and helping to revive this age-old art form.

The male and female characters perform rhythmic dances to Koothu songs that narrate the story of Kannaki and Kovalan. The comedian character keeps the audience engaged throughout the night, as the performance often begins after dusk and continues until morning.

In earlier times, makeup was done using ash, soot, and sandalwood paste. Costumes were made from materials like tree bark and a paste prepared from wild arayani. Today, performers wear modern attire such as sarees, churidars, dhotis, and shirts, blending traditional themes with contemporary expressions.

Mannankoothu Songs and Structure

The Mannan community believes that there are about eighty-five Koothu songs in existence. These songs have been passed down through generations as part of an oral tradition. They narrate the story of Kannaki and Kovalan — from their birth to Kannaki's arrival in Kerala. While the songs are inspired by the Silappathikaram epic, the Mannan version introduces its own variations in narrative and detail.

In earlier times, Mannan-Koothu was performed over seven days, with each stage presenting a portion of the Kannaki-Kovalan story. Today, the performance is usually limited to a single night due to changes in lifestyle and livelihood patterns.

The first three songs, known as Daiva Pattukal (divine songs), are particularly significant. They express the community's reverence for the gods, ancestors, and the king, and are sung to seek permission and blessings before the performance begins. These songs are usually performed separately in a corner near the main arena.

The performance concludes with the Mangalam song. During this final act, a bowl of water is placed at the centre of the arena; it is later sprinkled around the space to mark the ritual end of the Koothu.

Traditionally, Mannan-Koothu included a blend of songs, verses, and storytelling. However, this older structure is now fading, with most performances featuring only the songs. Some elders in the community still remember the complete version and share their knowledge to preserve it.

Folk songs called Muripaattukal were once interwoven with the Koothu to depict scenes from everyday life — such as farming in the forest, interpersonal relationships, or lullabies. These songs also provided rest intervals for the lead singers. In recent times, Malayalam songs are often used in place of Muripaattukal, as many traditional tunes have been lost.

Efforts are now being made to revive the older form of Mannan-Koothu and its traditional songs. Mani from Chinnapara notes that younger members of the community are learning the ancient

methods, working to bring back the authentic rhythm and essence of their cultural heritage.

MANNAN KOOTHU SONGS SAMPLE :

SI No.	Name of the Song	Type of the Song	Description	Link to the Archive
1	Nalla Ennoorunthan Thevarkalellam	Daiva Paattu	Mannan Koothu performed to the prayer song 'Nalla Ennoorunthan Thevarkalellam', traditionally sung in the beginning of the Mannan Koothu performance, offering respect to the 800 Mannan deities of the land and seeking their blessings. It is performed before the enactment of the Kannaki - Kovilan segment of the Koothu.	

2	Nammal Arare Pere Cholli Aaduvane	Daiva Paattu	<p>Adapted version of Mannan Koothu performed to the prayer song 'Nammal Arare Pere Cholli Aaduvane'</p> <p>This song is sung as a tribute to the ancestral founders of the Mannankoothu, Panchanpoolan and Periyankan, according to Mannan belief. They are praised in the song as a way of seeking their blessings.</p>	
3	Oh Raja Raja Chola Raja	Daiva Paattu	<p>Mannan Koothu performed to the prayer song 'Oh Raja Raja Chola Raja', also sung at the beginning of a Mannan Koothu performance, paying tribute to the King and the great elders of the community.</p>	

4	Nalla Rottoram Veettukari	Kaattu Paattu	<p>Mannan Koothu performed to the Muripaattu song 'Nalla Rottoram Veettukari'.</p> <p>The song describes a rural woman and admires her colorful saree, graceful walk and adornments.</p>	
5	Cholam Vithakkapona Muthamma	Krishi Paattu	<p>Mannan Koothu performed to the folksong 'Cholam Vithakkapona Muthamma'.</p> <p>The song describes an elderly woman, Muthamma, and her actions in cultivating crops like corn, ragi, and millets such as sowing the seeds, cutting the weed in the process.</p>	
6	Inji Manji Valinadandho Vanjikodiye Paaru	Idavela Paattu, Kaattu Paattu	<p>Mannan Koothu performed to the folksong 'Inji Manji Valinadandho', a song that describes the natural landscape, including rocky terrain, dense forests, and wild animals.</p>	

7	Chandramathipin en Kuyilo	Kannaki Kovalan Song	<p>Mannan Koothu performed to the Kannaki - Kovalan song 'Chandramathipin en Kuyilo'</p> <p>The song is a dialogue with the moon, asking it to light up the forest with moonlight as Kannaki and Kovilan walk through it.</p>	
8	Chinnankara Vanthath Ennen Karayo	Kaattu Paattu (Kotharai Paattu) Prema Song), Idavela Song	Mannan Koothu performed to the folk song 'Chinnankara Vanthath Ennen Karayo', a song describing the land praising the land of the king.	
9	Nalle Kallu Mele Makale Eera Venda	Kannaki Kovalan Song	Mannan Koothu performed to the Kannaki-Kovilan song 'Nalle Kallu Mele Makane Eera Venda', in which the young Kovilan is advised to be careful and cautious while playing in the forest, climbing rocks, or scaling trees	

10	Oh Raja Raja Chola Raja	Daiva Paattu	Adapted version of Mannan Koothu performed to the prayer song 'Oh Raja Raja Chola Raja', also sung at the beginning of a Mannan Koothu performance, paying tribute to the King and the great elders of the community.	
11	Ayya Varaaru Theppethu Madura Vittei	Kannaki Kovalan Song	Adapted version of Mannan koothu being performed to the song 'Ayya Varaaru Theppethu Madura Vittei'. This is a hunting related song, where the preparations, journey and sights during the hunting are explained through the lyrics.	

12	Kalludachu Kinarum Ketti	Pani Song	<p>Adapted version of Mannan koothu being performed to the song 'Kalludach Kinarum Ketti'.</p> <p>This song is referred to as 'pani paattu', where daily life activities are sung. In this song, tasks related to digging a well, fencing the yard, and caring for an infant are described.</p>	
13	Nalla Chandena Mamaram Allelallo, Chami Puranthayidam Allelallo	Kannaki Kovalan Song	<p>Adapted version of Mannan koothu being performed to the song 'Nalla Chandena Mamaram Allelallo'.</p> <p>This is one of the Kannaki - Kovalan songs of the Mannankoothu. Here in this song, a pleasant spring season is described within the lyrics, reflecting the happy phase in the life of Kannaki.</p>	

14	Periyath Thanniyile Vadivela, Penkalellam Neeraduthe Vadivela	Murugan Song	<p>Adapted version of Mannan koothu being performed to the song 'Periyath Thanniyile Vadivela'.</p> <p>The song is used to describe a woman in her daily routine,taking bath, brooming, getting ready in a playful banter.</p>	
15	Nalla Chathiyumilleyo Chanangalomilla	Kannaki Kovalan Song	<p>Adapted version of Mannan koothu being performed to the song 'Nalla Chathiyumilleyo Chanangalomilla'.</p> <p>The song describes the situation where Pandya King orders to execute Kovalan and Kovalan's loneliness is reflected in the song.</p>	
16	Mangalam Paattu	Mangalam Song	Mannan Koothu performed to the Mangalam song, as the concluding act in the arc of Mannan Koothu.	

Musical Instruments in Mannankoothu

Three main musical instruments or accessories are integral to Mannan-Koothu:

- (i) Mathalam
- (ii) Chilanka
- (iii) Ilathalam

The instrumentalists sit on a wooden platform known as benchikol or kol, which serves as their stage. The Mathalam player is seated in the front row, followed by the lead singer and other instrumentalists, with the chorus singers and learners forming the final line. This arrangement reflects both the hierarchy and the collaborative nature of the performance.

Mathalam : The Mathalam is a percussion drum traditionally crafted from the wood of the kumbil tree (*Gmelina arborea*) and fitted with the skin of the udumb (monitor lizard, *Varanus bengalensis*). As hunting monitor lizards is now prohibited, goat skin is used instead. Due to the scarcity of mature kumbil trees — which are mostly found deep in the forest — jackfruit wood is now often used as an alternative.

Many families continue to use Mathalams made by their ancestors, replacing only the drum skin when necessary. The making of a Mathalam is considered sacred and involves a ritual performed by the Moorikaru, a particular sub-group within the community. This ritual includes prayers and the preparation of a dish called Ada, traditionally made from ragi millet, though wheat is also used today.

The Mathalam and other instruments hold divine significance for the community. Before entering the Mannan-Koothu arena, performers bow before the Mathalam to seek its blessings, followed by prayers to the Goddess of the Earth (Bhoomi Devi). These acts of reverence reflect the community's deep spiritual connection to their art form and its sacred instruments.

Chilanka : The Chilanka is a jingling ornament tied around the dancers' ankles, producing rhythmic sounds that enhance the tempo of the performance. Each step of the dancer adds to the musical flow of the Koothu, blending movement and sound. Symbolically, the Chilanka represents

Kannaki's chilambu (anklet) from the Kannaki-Kovalan tale, connecting the performance to its mythological roots.

Ilathalam / Chalara : The Ilathalam, also known as Chalara, is a small metallic percussion instrument resembling miniature cymbals. It is used to create sharp, distinctive chimes that mark rhythm and transitions in the Koothu songs. The clear ringing of the Ilathalam complements the deeper tones of the Mathalam, adding texture and balance to the overall musical ensemble.

Women in Koothu

Traditionally, women of the Mannan community did not perform Mannan Koothu. One major reason for this restriction is the presence of Ayyappa worship and related rituals within the performance, which prohibit participation by menstruating women. Elderly women, however, were sometimes allowed to take part. Another reason lies in the belief that the Koothu arena is protected by magical spells cast by learned elders. Women generally avoided entering these spaces, fearing potential repercussions from these protective rituals.

In recent times, these restrictions have become more flexible. As the number of elders skilled in such ritual magic has declined, the sense of fear has lessened. Some teenage girls have started showing interest in Koothu performances, though they usually refrain from participating during ritualistic occasions. While a few elders express concern about possible unfavorable outcomes, many within the community welcome these efforts as a positive step towards the revival and continuation of Mannankoothu.

Tourism and Koothu

MannanKoothu has found a new platform through tourism initiatives in Kumily, supported by the Department of Forest and Wildlife under the Eco-Development Committee (EDC) scheme. Daily performances are held at the Vanashree Auditorium in Kumily. Earlier, the program also included visits to tribal hamlets and a museum experience, but at present, only the performance continues as an active component.

The integration of Koothu into tourism began as a revival effort by the Mannan community at their Kumily settlement. For nearly fifty years, the community faced challenges in preserving their cultural practices. Between 1998 and 2000, a conscious effort was made to learn, document, and revive Koothu. In 2009, the community established their own cultural centre at Kumily, marking a significant step in this revival journey.

The community's earlier performances revealed that the traditional, unstructured version of Koothu struggled to hold audience attention. This led to discussions on adapting Koothu for modern viewers while preserving its essence. Drawing inspiration from earlier special performances led by Thevan Rajamannan, visual and rhythmic elements were refined for stage appeal. Costumes were created using bark from the sacred Incha Kodi tree, and necklaces were made from Badraksham, another revered tree. Rhythmic dance steps were added to the narrative songs, giving the performance a more structured and engaging form.

Following the establishment of the EDC programs, Koothu performances moved from the community's own cultural space to the Forest Department's cultural centre. To better suit tourism contexts, the duration was shortened to about one hour, and audience interaction was added by inviting guests on stage.

Biju, a community member, expresses hope that the traditional version of Koothu will one day find equal recognition in tourism. At the same time, he acknowledges the success of the Kumily model as a promising example of how Mannan-Koothu can adapt, sustain itself, and continue to represent the cultural identity of the Mannan community.