Chapter 3 : Mannankoothu & Koothu Paattukal

Mannankoothu is a traditional cultural dance performance of the Mannan community, combining expressive movements with Mannankoothu songs, and accompanied by traditional instruments and accessories. Community members talked about the Koothu as an important part of social and cultural life that brings people together through music and storytelling. The narratives enacted in Mannankoothu are based on the legendary tale of *Kannaki* and *Kovalan*, though the Mannan version differs slightly from the classic Tamil Sangam epic *Silappathikaram*. Through rhythmic songs, vibrant dance, and symbolic gestures, the community preserves and retells this story in a distinct cultural form.

In earlier times, Mannankoothu was performed weekly under the guidance of the *Kaani*, or chieftain, within each hamlet. The performance has undergone changes over time due to internal shifts and external pressures, gradually transitioning from a form of social theater to a dance performance. Some traditional songs have been replaced by Malayalam songs. Today, Mannankoothu is primarily performed during annual festivals such as Kaalavootu and Pongal, or on special occasions, including the passing of prominent community members.

In an attempt to revive the performance and its cultural significance, a segment of Mannankoothu has evolved into a tourism attraction as well. Community members expressed diverse opinions about this adaptation, noting that ritual nuances are often modified for tourism.

Mythological Origin of Mannan-Koothu

According to the beliefs of the Mannan community, Mannankoothu was founded by two ancestral brothers, *Panchampoolan* and *Periyanankan*. 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 that only one of them could be taught the art directly. As a

result, the elder brother, *Panchampoolan*, learned within the *gurukulam*, while *Periyanankan* 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 *Periyanankan*, 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 Mannankoothu, passing it down through generations of the Mannan community.

Costume and Makeup in Mannankoothu

Mannankoothu 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 by dressing up as females. In recent times, there is a subtle shift through the participation of elderly women and young girls, 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 and awake throughout the night, as the performance begins after dusk and continues until the next day at dawn.

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, Mannankoothu 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 center of the arena; it is later sprinkled around the space to mark the ritual end of the Koothu.

Traditionally, Mannankoothu 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 Mannankoothu 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.

Musical Instruments in Mannan-Koothu

Three main musical instruments or accessories are integral to Mannankoothu:
(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: Mathalam is a percussion drum traditionally crafted from the wood of the *kumbil* tree (White Teak - *Gmelina arborea*) and fitted with the skin of the *udumb* (Monitor Lizard - *Varanus bengalensis*) on one side and the skin of *Koora* deer (Indian Spotted Chevrotain - *Moschiola indica*) on the other side. 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.

We learned that 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 *Moorikar*, 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 Mannankoothu arena, performers bow before the Mathalam to seek its blessings, followed by prayers to the Earth Goddess (*Bhoomi Devi*). These acts of reverence reflect the community's deep spiritual connection to their art form and its sacred instruments.

Chilanka: 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: 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 Mannankoothu. 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.

Written from conversations with Radha and Rejitha, who actively perform the Mannankoothu today.

Mannankoothu and its evolution

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 center 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* (

Elaeocarpus tuberculatus), 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 Mannankoothu can adapt, sustain itself, and continue to represent the cultural identity of the Mannan community.

Links to Mannankoothu songs and performances

1. Nalla Ennoorunthan Thevarkalellam / □□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

This prayer song is traditionally sung at 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 Aaduvene / □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□

This prayer song is sung as a tribute to the ancestral founders of the Mannankoothu, *Panchanpoolan* and *Periyanankan*. They are praised in the song as a way of seeking their blessings.

3. Oh Raja Raja Chola Raja / □ □□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□

This prayer song is sung to pay tribute to the King and the great elders of the community.

4. Nalla Rottoram Veettukari / □□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□

This is a *Muripaattu* song that describes a rural woman and admires her colorful saree, graceful walk and adornments.

5. Cholam Vithakkapona Muthamma / □□□□ □□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□

This song describes an elderly woman, Muthamma, and her actions in cultivating crops like corn, ragi, and millets, such as sowing the seeds, cutting weeds, etc..

6. Inji Manji Valinadandho Vanjikodiye Paaru / □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□

This is a *Muripaattu* song that describes the natural landscape, including rocky terrain, dense forests, and wild animals.

7. Chandramathipinen Kuyilo / □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□

This song is a dialogue with the moon, asking it to light up the forest with moonlight as *Kannaki* and *Kovalan* walk through it.

8. Chinnankara Vanthath Ennen Karayo / □□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□

This is a *Muripattu* song describing the land, and praising the land of the king.

9. Nalle Kallu Mele Makane Eera Venda / □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□ □□□□□

This is a *Kannaki-Kovilan* song in which the young Kovilan is advised to be careful and cautious while playing in the forest, climbing rocks, or scaling trees.

10. 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.

11. Kalludachu Kinarum Ketti / □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□

This song is referred to as '*pani paattu*', in which daily life activities are sung. In this song, tasks related to digging a well, fencing the yard, and caring for an infant are described.

12. Nalla Chandena Mamaram Allellallo / □□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□□□

This is one of the *Kannaki - Kovalan* songs. In this song, a pleasant spring season is described within the lyrics, reflecting the happy phase in the life of Kannaki.

13. Periyath Thanniyile Vadivela / □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□

The song is used to describe a woman in her daily routine, taking bath, grooming, and getting ready in a playful banter.

14. Nalla Chathiyumilleyo Chanangalomilla / □□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□

The song describes the situation where the Pandya King orders to execute *Kovalan*. *Kovalan's* loneliness is reflected in the song.

15. Mangalam Paattu / □□□□□ □□□□□□

The Mangalam song is sung as the concluding act in the arc of Mannan Koothu.

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