

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.

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