Chapter 3 : Paliya Artforms

Paliya Nritham is a traditional dance form practiced within the Paliya community and is performed by both men and women. Community members explained that the performance is accompanied by Paliya songs and musical instruments, with a repertoire of six songs commonly used.

Paliya Nritham continues to be regarded as a central art form within the community. Aruvi recalled sharing the stage with his uncle at the age of twelve, whom he remembers as an accomplished dancer. He also spoke of being teased and judged by his peers at the time. Reflecting on these experiences, Aruvi expressed pride in his later involvement in efforts to revive Paliya culture at a national level.

> “Sarojamma shared her memories of earlier times when members of the community gathered around a banyan tree at what is now the *Palichiyamma* Temple and performed Paliya Nritham around a fire at the site during many evenings.

We heard many stories about how the community used to perform Paliya Nritham within their hamlet from early days. During those times, they used to gather materials from the forest such as beads and bamboo. Natural colours were prepared for makeup using locally available materials, such as red color from squeezing teak leaves, yellow from turmeric, and white from grinding *aamakallu*, a type of rock into powder.

Visibility for Paliya Nritham

In Kumali, cultural activities remain vibrant, and community members formed a cultural art troupe named *Vellayankani Paliya Parambaragatha Nritha Sangam*. Through this troupe, they traveled to various parts of the country, including Delhi, Orissa, and Jharkhand. The formation of the *Vellayankani Paliya Parambaragatha Nritha Samithi* was described as an initiative to create

livelihood opportunities for the community through the performance of Paliya Nritham. *Vellayankani Paliya Parambaragatha Nritha Sangham* is named after a great grand elder named Vellayankani in the community story.

According to Aruvi's memory, the community first performed in a small event at a school in Kumali where a tribal festival was conducted and the community won an award for their dance and slowly started to take recognition thereafter with further stages opening up. Aruvi remembers how once they finished their performance with a song that calls for rain at Ernakulam, the weather changed and it started to rain.

> "
>
> **Paliyanritham For Livelihood**
>
> Aruvi remembers that in the late 1990s, the forest department approached the community to perform the Paliya Nritham as a tourism program through the Eco-Development Committee under the Forest Department, to create a livelihood option for the community members. "After performing the Paliya Nritham before a minister, we were appreciated and encouraged to perform and showcase our culture."
>
> Aruvi remembers a secretary from the forest department named Jyothikumar being instrumental in helping with designing the ornaments and costumes for the troupe and their performance. And slowly as we generated income we were able to further repair and develop our instruments which were quite old at the time.
>
> In the later stages, the community decided to stop associating with the department and their tourism programs due to operational challenges.

At the same time, differing opinions exist outside the community regarding the origin and authenticity of the form as it is performed today. We encountered views suggesting that the present form is a constructed performance created primarily for the stage and not entirely rooted in older traditions. However, our interactions indicate that a traditional dance form does exist in community memory, particularly associated with performances around a fire near the banyan tree.

From our perspective, Paliya Nritham, like many art forms, has undergone processes of adaptation and transformation over time. The limited number of Paliya songs and the highly structured and choreographed steps observed today appear to be part of this evolution. These developments can also be understood as revival efforts by the community to assert their cultural values and seek wider recognition and appreciation.

> **The Youth Festival Dilemma**
>
> Paliya Nritham is now widely performed at Kerala State Youth Festival venues each year and has received numerous awards. However, Aruvi expressed mixed feelings about this development. While he acknowledges that the festival has brought wider visibility to the art form, he questions whether it is being presented with the appropriate intent.
>
> According to Aruvi, Paliya Nritham must be performed with faith and reverence, as it is a form of *Aradhana* Nritham, or dance of worship. In the context of youth festivals, however, it is often treated as a competitive item, with emphasis placed on marks and prizes. He feels that this competitive framing strips the performance of its spiritual essence and core meaning. When the dance becomes a graded activity, he argues, its original rhythm and fluidity are lost and replaced by a rigid, standardized structure.
>
> Aruvi also pointed to instances where incorrect lyrics are used in performances. One such example involves the original line "*vareeraya vareeraya*" being rendered as "*varekaala varekaala*." While the original song is an invocation of revered ancestors and a call to nature, the altered version invokes *Kaalan*, a figure associated with death — an interpretation that stands in direct contradiction to the spirit and intent of Paliya Nritham. Despite this, such performances are often rewarded at festivals without adequate cultural understanding.
>
> Aruvi emphasizes the need for greater cultural responsibility, urging performers, judges, and institutions to engage more deeply with the traditions they present. He believes that the lack of informed evaluation and sensitivity in these

> performances has caused distress within the community.

Paliyar Songs

Paliya culture is often described by community members as being rich in songs. During our interactions, we were told that songs exist for many situations encountered in everyday life. Elders are said to possess extensive knowledge of these songs, though they rarely sing them openly. Instead, such songs are expressed during intimate or personal moments, and it is often in these contexts that younger members of the community are exposed to this reservoir of cultural knowledge.

In the context of Paliya Nritham, community members identified around six songs that are commonly used, including the *Nellukuthu* song, *Kalyana* song, *Mullaperiyar* song, *Aaradhana* song, *Komali* song, and *Tharattu* song. These are the songs that are most frequently sung, revived, and circulated within the community today.

Aruvi, the chieftain of the Kumali settlement, reflected on how he has forgotten many of the songs and their lyrics. At present, the six songs associated with Paliya Nritham have been written down and preserved within the community. It remains unclear whether these songs have been in use since earlier times or whether they were composed or formalized during efforts to develop Paliya Nritham as a livelihood practice. However, given the community's own articulation of a rich song culture, we understand these songs as part of a broader continuum of tradition, adaptation, and cultural evolution.

(i) *Nellukuthu Paattu*: The *Nellukuthu Paattu* is rooted in the traditional agrarian practices of Paliyar. This song and dance sequence visually and audibly narrates the entire cycle of paddy cultivation, from the crucial phase of seed sowing to the culminating period of harvesting. As an ethnographic record, it provides invaluable insights into traditional agricultural methods, the communal labor involved, and the inherent gratitude towards the land's bounty. The rhythmic movements and lyrical narratives are not merely entertainment but serve as a living archive of their sustenance strategies and their profound connection to the natural environment. This performance exemplifies the intersection of cultural expression and daily subsistence within the community.

(ii) *Kalyana Paattu*: The *Kalyana Paattu* in Paliyar tradition represents a distinct genre of ceremonial music and performance integral to their marriage rituals. This song and dance form is characterized by reciprocal, playful banter between the families of the bride and groom. Structurally, it involves the groom's kin engaging in lighthearted teasing of the bride's family, and vice versa. It highlights the social dynamics, kinship structures, and the culturally sanctioned mechanisms for communal interaction and humor within Paliyar matrimonial ceremonies. It serves as a significant record of their social customs, demonstrating the community's approach to celebration, inter-familial relations, and the use of performance as a medium for social commentary and cohesion.

(iii) *Mullaperiyar Paattu*: This specific song from the Paliyar community stands as a critical piece of oral history, offering a unique indigenous perspective on the construction of the Mullaperiyar Dam. It serves as an archival record, articulating the experiences of Paliyar ancestors who participated in, or were impacted by, this monumental engineering project. The narrative, meticulously passed down through generations, often details the challenges faced, the labor contributed, and the socio-economic transformations witnessed by the community during the dam's construction. This song is a vital resource for understanding the human dimension of large-scale infrastructure development from the viewpoint of local communities, preserving narratives that may not be present in official historical documents.

(iv) *Aaradhana Nritham*: The Aradhana Nritham is the foremost ritualistic dance of the Paliyar community, embodying profound spiritual and cultural significance. This performance is a direct act of veneration dedicated to their clan deity, Elaath Pallichiyamma. Ethnographically, it is presented following the annual harvest, serving as a formal offering of the year's agricultural yield, often accompanied by the preparation and presentation of *Pongala*. This dance is a powerful expression of their animistic beliefs, their deep reverence for their ancestral deity, and their spiritual connection to the land and its productivity. It provides crucial insights into their religious practices, ceremonial cycles, and the role of collective worship in reinforcing community identity and seeking divine blessings for prosperity.

Apart from these songs there are small songs used in the occasion while traveling to forest, describing the wild animals etc. This highlights how close the Paliyar community keeps their identity with music. In addition to these mentioned songs there are special songs during the event of death. Different songs are sung at the event of the death of various individuals such as in case of the passing away of *Kaanikaran*, a youth, a relative or spouse etc. A few of the community elders

know these songs.

Musical instruments

Along with the music Paliya community uses various musical instruments such as *Nakaara, Mulachenda/Mulathalam, Chattithalam, Jalara, Urumi/Udukkua & Chilanka.*

Out of these, *Nakara, Mulathalam* and *Chattithalam* used to be the traditional instruments of the Paliya community. Once the *chattithalam* instrument was broken, the community shifted to using a *djembe* instead. Likewise *jalara, chilanka* and *urumi* are also variations from their traditional instruments.

Revision #2
Created 2026-01-09 09:00:42 UTC by Vysakh R
Updated 2026-01-09 09:37:29 UTC by Vysakh R