Chapter 1 : About The Community

“Among us, playing the Tudi is not formally taught. We learn it ourselves, simply by watching and listening.”

— Mani Valliyurkavu

Long before written archives or documented histories, the philosophy, traditions, and soul of the Paniya community were carried through the soulful strains of the Kuyalu, the rhythmic beat of the Tudi, and sacred oral songs. Without textbooks or written records, their culture has passed from one generation to the next through living practice—learned naturally within the community by observing, listening, and participating. Across centuries of severe socioeconomic hardship, marginalization, and landlessness, the Paniya people have preserved this rich ancestral wisdom and oral heritage, including the sacred songs sung by traditional officiants like the Aattali. For the Paniya, art, music, and rituals are not mere things of the past; they are the living breath of their communal identity. Yet, maintaining this ancient artistic lineage in the face of modern socio-cultural shifts and external influences poses an ongoing challenge—one that reveals both the struggle of preserving an unwritten legacy and the extraordinary resilience of a community holding fast to its roots.

This year, the ARPO Documentation Team focused its research in Wayanad—the district with the highest Scheduled Tribe population in Kerala—to document the heritage of the Paniya community, the largest Scheduled Tribe group in the state. Our team conducted extensive field studies across various regions in Wayanad, including Mananthavady, Kalpetta, Sultan Bathery, Meppadi, and Vythiri. Fully comprehending a community endowed with such rich history and expressive culture within a limited timeframe was our greatest challenge. Nevertheless, the active support we received from members of the Paniya community and social activists working in tribal areas helped us overcome this hurdle to a great extent, allowing us to document a meaningful part of the Paniya community's cultural heritage and living traditions.

Demography and Distribution

According to the 2011 Census of India, the Paniya population in Kerala is 88,450, which includes 42,775 men and 45,675 women. According to the 2013 Government of Kerala socio-economic report, their sex ratio is 1000:1057.

The majority of the Paniya population lives in Wayanad district, which accounts for nearly three-fourths of their total numbers. Smaller groups live in Kannur, Kozhikode, Malappuram, and Palakkad districts, while scattered families reside in Thiruvananthapuram and Ernakulam.

Historical Background, Origin of the Name, and Bonded Labour

In earlier times, the Paniya lived freely in the forest areas of Wayanad, practicing hunting and shifting cultivation. Oral traditions recall their early ancestral life at Ippimala.

The word pani means "work", and Paniya means "people who work". Community members express criticism that the name Paniya was given to them by feudal landlords (Janmis) and the society, defining their identity around manual labor.

With the arrival of migrant settlers, the Paniya were forced into a system of bonded labor under different categories of landholders. Their period of bondage lasted for one year, until the next Valliyurkavu festival near Mananthavady. Landlords renewed the labor contracts each year at Valliyurkavu by paying an advance cash sum known as Nippu panam. For generations, the Paniya worked in the agricultural fields and coffee plantations of landlords, recognized for their physical strength and skill in tilling the soil.

Although bonded labor was legally abolished in 1976, many Paniya families still remain landless, and only a few have become cultivators.

Settlement Structure, Leadership, and Regional Variations

A traditional Paniya settlement where families reside together in a cluster is called a Karimam. The community is divided into distinct lineage groups and clans (Illam or Kulam).

Social organization and customary practices within the Karimam are managed through traditional leadership positions:

- Primary administrative and traditional leadership positions include the Chemmi, Koyame, Karema, and Kayathan.
- The Aattali serves as an important religious officiant. The historical memory and accounts of the Paniya people are preserved within the songs sung by the Aattali during community rituals, primarily during post-death ceremonies.
- Other customary roles with specific duties include the Kootan, Pechikkarathi, and Munnayikkar.

The Paniya community observes a wide range of life ceremonies, including birth rituals, Nerancha Kallyana (a puberty ceremony), marriage rites, Aattukazhikkal (Spiritual healing ritual), and religious rituals honoring deities, all of which reflect their cultural tradition.

Noticeable regional differences exist across different Paniya settlements in Wayanad regarding language, lifestyle, performing arts—such as Vattakkali performance to the musical instruments Tudi and Kuyalu playing—and rituals.

There are many regional variations among the Paniya across different areas. But we move forward by accepting and respecting all these variations among ourselves.

— Sasi C. Kalpetta (Kuyalu Artist)

Field Collaborators, Methodology, and Cultural Dynamics

Our documentation work was carried out through direct collaboration with members of the Paniya community and social workers who possess diverse qualifications and backgrounds across various fields, including literature, arts and cultural activities, social activism, filmmaking, and higher education.

To ensure cultural accuracy, ethical representation, and proper validation of indigenous knowledge, we established a Community Review Panel consisting entirely of social workers, artists, writers, and community leaders from within the Paniya community across different regions of Wayanad. This panel met to review the recorded content and verify details regarding local traditions, language, and cultural practices.

During these community discussions and field interactions, members shared reflections on their evolving cultural landscape. Community members expressed criticism regarding the encroachment of mainstream Hindu culture into Paniya tradition, attributing this influence to government

interventions and broader society. Additionally, community members observe varying levels of interest among individuals toward their traditional language, culture, arts, and customs. These highlighted points serve merely as examples of the ongoing cultural shifts, underscoring the immense scope that remains for similar in-depth and extensive research in the future. This highlights a critical area for continued documentation and academic inquiry.

Scope of Subsequent Sections

Through these upcoming sections, we aim to examine the cultural, social, and creative practices that define the resilience and identity of the Paniya people.

The following sections will explore key aspects of Paniya heritage and daily life in detail:

- Musical Instruments: The traditional instruments of the Paniya which form the rhythmic backbone of their cultural expressions.
- Art Forms: Indigenous music and performing arts, particularly Vattakkali, where song and dance are combined in community celebrations.
- Ornaments and Crafts: Traditional adornments and material crafts that reflect their unique aesthetic traditions.
- Rituals and Beliefs: Sacred practices, deity worship, life-cycle ceremonies from birth to death, and spiritual ceremonies that sustain their belief system.
- Social Life : The historical journey of the Paniya community's socio-cultural life, the inner dynamics of community living, traditional leadership roles, their present social reality, and the future aspirations and contemporary efforts toward socio-economic progress.

Together, these sections provide a comprehensive view of the cultural strength and active endeavors of the Paniya community as they stride toward a better future.

Revision #1
Created 2026-11-03 11:29:28 UTC by Anand
Updated 2026-11-03 11:32:59 UTC by Anand