

# Cultural Expressions through Art and Aesthetics: A Study among Paniya Community in Wayanad, Kerala

*Josna Joshy*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Central University of Odisha, Koraput.

E-mail: [josnajoshysunflower@gmail.com](mailto:josnajoshysunflower@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** The word culture is very dynamic and multidimensional term, based on the sociological understanding culture is the collective identity, collective behavior, beliefs, rules, knowledge etc. In an anthropological point of view culture is the learned and shared behaviors and beliefs. In a cultural anthropological sense, it is focusing the cultural variations in societies. In any society they have their own culture and traditions that are completely differ from other society. By taking India as an example India consists multiple cultures and that are visible in beliefs, language, food habits, dressing patterns etc. In a broader sense these external appearances of different cultures are known as cultural expressions. Cultural expressions on human body are the body modifications for proving the belongingness of a culture. Through art and aesthetics cultural transmissions and also cultural expressions are taking place largely. Contrast to other societies the tribal communities have more skill and talent in making the artistic and aesthetic handiworks. Paniya is the largest scheduled tribe located in various districts of Kerala, they are following a unique way of life comparing others. This study is about the Paniya's cultural expressions through art and aesthetics with reference to Wayanad district, Kerala.

**Keywords:** Culture, Cultural expressions, Body modifications, Paniya

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## Introduction

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Art and aesthetics are the physical representation of cultural ideas, beliefs and practices. Every society have their own artistic and aesthetic outputs and these all are not only one generation it is the transmitting culture to one generation to another. Art and aesthetics mean the human activities of creating visual, auditory or performing artifacts expressing the creator's imaginative, technical skills. In the case of tribal people, their art and aesthetics are entirely depending on environment, they

are collecting raw materials from nature and making artistic creations. They are using their artistic and aesthetic talent for their own subsistence. Kerala is the southern state of India, there are approximately 48 tribal communities. They possess a rich artistic and cultural heritage. They are following a unique artistic and aesthetic tradition. In the past decade lot of research works had focused on Kerala tribes and their culture, but there is no specific district wise explanation of tribal culture. In the case of Wayanad, the tribal culture and tradition are hidden. Based on the available study, Wayanad is the homeland of various tribal communities. So, Wayanad having a plentiful legacy of art, craft, music and handicrafts. In this context, the purpose of this is to analyze the various art and aesthetic forms among the Paniya community in Wayanad, Kerala.

### Literature Review

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Somasekharan Nair (1976) “Paniyar” points out that art and aesthetics is an unavoidable part of Paniya’s life. We can’t separate it from their life because it is closely related with them. Through this book the author gives a cultural description of the Paniya tribe in Kerala. This book conveys a light into the socio-cultural life of the Paniya’s in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is useful for the deeper understanding of Paniya tribe in a broader level.

Chandramohan (2013) “Wayanattile Aadhivasi Pattukal” (Tribal songs in Kerala) Author is explaining the history of tribal people in Kerala. In the ancient time slave trade is one of the major activities in Kerala. The slaves are mainly from the tribal people especially Paniyas. He also explained the importance of tribal songs in Kerala.

Gopalan Nair (1911) “Wayanad Janangalum Parambaryavum” (People and tradition of Kerala) points out that Paniya tribes are very much interested in music. In harvesting time and other agricultural activities their hobby is to sing songs for reducing the job effort.

Satheesan (2021) “Aadhivasi kalum Mulankadukalum” (Tribes and forests) This book is about the tribal people and their relationship between forest. In ancient times they were completely relied on forest for their livelihood. They used forest products like bamboo for making pots, for constructing houses and other various uses.

### Research Methodology

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The data of the study were collected through primary and secondary sources, based on qualitative and empirical research strategy. Field based investigation, unstructured

interview, participant and non-participant observation. The secondary data collected through by referring various published books, research reports, newspaper reports.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the ethnic history of Paniya community
2. To find out artistic and aesthetic expressions of Paniya community
3. To examine the recent changes in art and aesthetic expressions.

## Study Area

Wayanad is the rural district in Kerala state, India. Wayanad revenue district is divided in to 3 taluks and 49 villages. Mananthavady, Sultan Bathery and Vythiri are the 3 taluks. According to the 2011 census of India, the Scheduled Tribe population in Kerala is 4,84,839 and in Wayanad the scheduled tribe population is 151443. In percentage wise 18.5% of Kerala's tribe who lives in Wayanad. [Fig-1]



Figure 1: Location Map of Wayanad

## Results

### *Ethnographic Profile*

Paniya tribes they are the inhabitants of southern Kerala, especially in the regions of Wayanad, Kozhikode, Kannur and Malappuram. They belong to the Dravidian language family they have their own language known as Paniya language. Paniya is the largest scheduled tribe in Kerala. In native language the word Paniya means

worker or laborer in general and they are supposed to have been the workers of non-tribal people. Turning back to the history they were literally slaves in the feudal system. They were worked as agricultural labors, they believed that they are the original inhabitants of Kerala. Based on the view of Das (2017) “Paniyas are the dark skinned tribe, short in nature with broad noses and curly or wavy hair” [Fig- 2]



Figure 2: A Paniya Woman

Their appearance have lot of varieties from other tribes, single long cloth wrapped around their waist is the male dressing style, and woman who cover or wrap their entire body by using one long cloth and other piece of cloth. One belt called *árati* is tied around their waist. In puberty ceremony the girl who wore ‘chela’ (kind of sari) and belt must be in red color.

### *Food Culture*

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Traditionally they are food gatherers, they have plenty of information about the forest foods and conventional ways of collecting food items. Edible roots, leaves, small crab, rice, tapioca, fish, vegetables, roots are their staple food items.



Figure 3: Forest Food

### *Religion*

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Paniya community has their own religious tradition and rituals. Kuttichathan, Kattubhagavathi or Kaali, Malakkar, Ariyamma and Ayyappan are the chief God and Goddess. Valliyurkaavulsavam (temple festival) is their prominent festival can be fall in the months of February, March and April. The banyan tree is very significant in their unseen world as if they believe that spirits live on it.

### *Political Organization*

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Paniya settlement is known as colonies, in each colony they are selecting one chief man who must be the eldest member of that colony. All the powers and

responsibilities are headed over the chief man. Traditionally the chief man is known as the 'chemmi'(head man). The position of chemmi (head man) is transferred through generations. He works as the chief man in all religious activities like birth, puberty, marriage, death ceremonies.

### *Artistic and Aesthetic Expressions*

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Paniya art and aesthetics are indigenous in nature because all the materials used for these expressions are collected from the natural environment.

### *Ornaments*

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**Thoda (ear ring):** Thoda (ear ring) is the traditional ear ring mainly used for the beauty of the ear. This ear ring is makes with the lucky red seeds stuck inside a ring of coconut palm or dry grass leaf using beeswax or gum from jackfruit tree.



Figure 4: Thoda (ear ring)

**Panakalla (chain):** Panakalla (chain) is used only in the time of festivals. This is a sacred ornament worn by women of the community. Made with small beads and kind of coins were patched between the beads.



Figure 5: Panakalla (chain)

**Mudachil (necklace):** Mudachil(necklace) is made with small beads and plastic thread. It is the casual wear ornament of traditional paniya community.



Figure 6: Mudachil (necklace)

**Chilanka (anklet):** Chilanka (anklet) has very religious and traditional value in every paniya settlement. The priest of the Paniya settlement owns this ornament. In some religious festivals like daivamkanal (religious ceremony) and temple festival chilanka (anklet) is widely using. It made with thread, bamboo pieces and fifteen bronze bells.



Figure 7: Chilanka (anklet)

### *Household Vessels*

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**Mulanaazhi (measuring instrument):** Mulanaazhi (measuring instrument) is a kind of measuring equipment made with sprig used for measuring cereals and pulses.



Figure 8: Mulanaazhi (measuring instrument)

**Chiratta Kayil (coconut shell spoon):** Chirattakayil (coconut shell spoon) is used for serving gravy it also looks like spoon, made with coconut shell and piece of bamboo.



Figure 9: ChirattaKayil (coconut shell spoon)

**Kurandy (chair):** Kurandy (small chair) is usually seen in the houses of all Paniya community, mainly used for sitting purpose made with any type of wood.



Figure 10: Kurandy (chair)

**Oral (grinder):** Oral (grinder) is a kind of grinding equipment and this thing generally used for grinding. Made with jackfruit tree wood. Commonly oral is one of the unavoidable parts of every Paniya house.



Figure 11: Oral (grinder)

**Maraayi (grinder):** Maraayi (grinder) is a kind of chilly grinding instrument, it is made with wood (jackfruit tree or tamarind tree).



Figure 12: Maraayi (grinder)

**Chaada (fish catching equipment):** Chaada (fish catching equipment) is an equipment used for fishing from the river, made with bamboo sprigs.



Figure 13: Chaada (fish catching equipment)

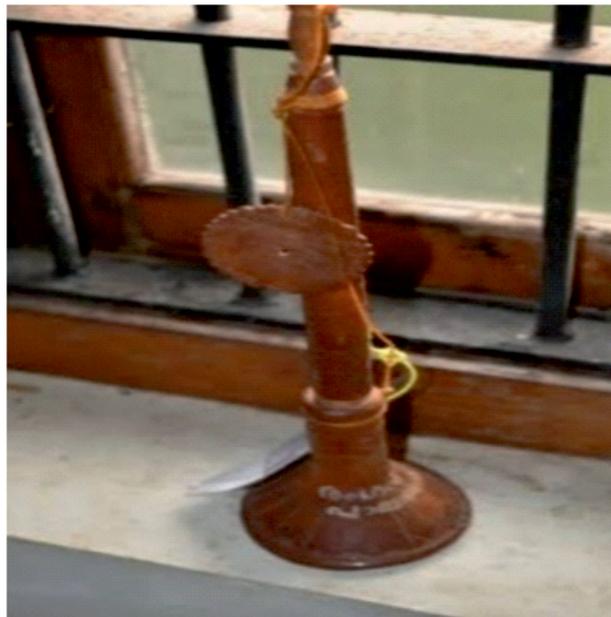
**Chetta (cereals storing bag):** Chetta (cereals storing bag) is made with bamboo, it is look like chaada (fish catching equipment) but it is much bigger than chaada (fish catching equipment). Mainly using for store cereals and pulses.



Figure 14: Chetta (cereals storing bag)

### *Musical Instruments*

**Kuzhal (wind instrument):** Kuzhal(wind instrument) is long bamboo pipe. Paniya believes that the instrument kuzhal(wind instrument) had given by God to their children for playing. So, the sound that comes from the kuzhal (wind instrument) is believed to be the sound of God. Kuzhal (wind instrument) is not a simple object it has a life and it symbolizes the Paniya life. Kuzhal (wind instrument) is the depiction of moopan (head man) or elder man of the family. Kuzhal (wind instrument) cannot be touched by the women who are in their menstrual period. If women touched the kuzhal(wind instrument) in the period of menstruation it has to be purified with certain rituals. At home kuzhal(wind instrument) will be kept top of the roof or the sacred place inside of the house. Nobody will handle it without respect. Usually, the head of the family also paying reverence to kuzhal (wind instrument) and take them out for performances.



**Figure 15: Kuzhal (wind instrument)**

**Thudi (drum):** Thudi (drum) is a musical instrument, made out of wood and goat skin with simple hand made technologies. Paniya community are very experts in making thudi (drum), this instrument has six main parts. Main part is called thudimaram (tree) or the frame of thudi (drum) which is one foot length with hollowed wooden piece. For this frame construction they are using jack fruit tree

or banyan tree. They are using their own traditional instruments for making thudi (drum), such as manthuli, veethuli, vakkathi (varieties of knife) etc.



Figure 16: Thudi (drum)

### *Symbolism of Thudi and Kuzhal (drum and wind instrument)*

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In special religious occasions the head who performs the kuzhal (wind instrument) first and then it is given to others. By performing the kuzhalvili (calling others by using the wind instrument) the head who is calling the spirit of ancestors. Kuzhal (wind instrument) and Thudi (drum) is considered as the members of society and also, they are respecting. When the head who starts the kuzhal (wind instrument) the all men are start to striking thudi (drum) and women, children they form a circle and dance around the thudi (drum) performers.

### *Recent Changes*

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Presently Paniya community have been facing lot of changes in their culture, they are closely related with the modern culture. Influence of the social change has brought about a lot of cultural change. Traditionally they were living in a settlement as a group. These days we can see they are living in some kind of nuclear family system because of governmental intervention. Government is giving them houses under the tribal housing scheme. The traditional huts are replaced by modern

concrete roofed buildings. The traditional ornaments such as soothola, thoda (ear ring) and beaded chain are replaced by the modern jewelries. Their traditional dress is rarely seen today, that is changed in to modern lungies and shirts. Their traditional instruments like Kuzhal (wind instrument) and Thudi (drum) are not using now. Their traditional dance and folk culture are endangering now.

In contemporary world Paniya community is under the pressure of modernization and other influences. Their traditional culture and customs are drastically changing. The community doesn't have a set pattern of beliefs and practices based on any book or scripture, they are always found very much flexible to adopt or follow any new beliefs and customs from the surrounding societies. Some of the factors of these social changes are modernism, education, religion, economic standards and large interaction with other communities. Sanskritization has also brought some changes among the lifestyle of the Paniyas. They are started to imitating the higher upper castes for becoming a dominant position in society.

## Conclusion

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Tribal people who are the early inhabitants on earth, they were keeping an environment friendly life style as well as they had deep awareness in traditional knowledge. In this rapid globalizing world, they are losing their ethnic culture. The intense pressure of other modern cultures is narrowing down the tribal artistic and aesthetic skills. Now a days they are not interested to do their conventional jobs because they are not economically and culturally satisfied. They were the people who depended on forest in early periods, the deforestation and urbanization destructed their home land and the process of cultural adaptation happening widely. The governments rules and regulations also supporting them to come forward. On the other hand, indigenous knowledge, cultural heritage, art and aesthetic is transforming, tribal people himself are neglecting their culture. Paniya community was closely related with art, craft, music and dance and they were experts in it. In present day they are facing lot of challenges because of the modern world and changing culture.

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