

## FOLKLORE OF KERALA - A GLIMPSE



**PushpaHariharan & Dr.LalithaSanthanam**  
**Vel's Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies ( VISTAS),**  
**Pallavaram, Chennai.**

### **Aim :**

This article is to provide a glimpse of the Folklore of Kerala and some Art forms, myths and legends associated with it. Sights and sounds of Mother Nature, its rustic elements influence the populace living in a region and give birth to Folklore. Such traditions and music are so unique and rich in its variety. Folklores are many in Kerala and they are associated with the origin, culture, festivals of the region. They encapsulate the pleasures, griefs, hopes and dreams of the common people.<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract:**

“Lore means a particular body of knowledge or tradition”. It would encompass all beliefs, customs, taboos, fables, legend, mythology of a region. It is the “lore” of common people. The heart of any land lies in its folklore. Folklore of any region is showcased not only in its arts, its music and dance but also in the behaviour, spontaneity of expressions and thoughts of the people living in that region. The people of Kerala are simple, culturally inclined, very traditional and religious people. They love feasts and festivals. Hence they express their myriad emotions through the numerous art forms associated with these feasts, festivals and rituals.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Kerala is a land reclaimed by Sage Parasurama, an incarnate of Lord Vishnu, according to mythological legends. It is a land in which four out of the five natural landscapes or Thinais of the Sangam Age, similar to those mentioned by Tholkapiyar in his work, “Tholkapiyum”, are manifested namely Neithal ( Coastal areas ), Kurinji ( Hilly tracks), Marudam ( Agricultural) and Mullai ( Forest region). It has a long shoreline with serene beaches, tranquil stretches of backwaters, lush hill stations exotic forests and wildlife, green paddy fields etc. These different landscapes became the unrefined material that shaped many different cultures and traditions. The culture of Kerala region evolved over centuries and today it is a harmonious blend of many heterogeneous cultures and traditions. This assimilation of various cultures has been reflected beautifully and colourfully in its multifarious folklore and folk art forms. The uniqueness of its culture is testimony to its rich tradition and legacy.

It was under the rule of the Kings of the Kolathunadu that the folklore and its associated rituals, beliefs, taboos and folk performing Arts was categorised. Padayani, Mudi yettu, Thirayattam,

<sup>1</sup>Indianetzone.-Folklores of Kerala

Malavaiyattam,Theyyam are some of the ritual folklore. The Vadakkanpatukkal or the Northern Ballads which celebrate the exploits of TacholiOtenan, the Robinhood of North Malabar, the Vanchipattukkal or the boat songs of the South, Villupaattukal, the Thullal songs written by KunchanNambiar, a prolific poet and comedian of Kerala with social criticism,intertwined with wit and humour, as the underlying theme, the Ottamthullalare distinct and special to Kerala's folklore.

Kerala has about 1000 folk art forms. "The Folklore of Kerala embraces the traditional beliefs, folk tales, folk songs, folk arts, folk beliefs, taboos,superstitions, omens and magic." <sup>2</sup>This article will shed light on some Folk forms and themyths associated with it under the following headings namely Folk Songs, Folk Dance and Folk Traditions.

## 1. FOLK SONGS:

The people of Kerala have a rich collection of folk songs .The themes for these songs are drawn from various subjects like religion, mythology, agriculture, sowing, harvesting, boat races, weddings, festivals etc.

### 1.1 VANCHIPATTU:

Vanchipattu literally refers to boat songs. The Vanchipattukkal belong to the poetic folk song genre of Kerala. They are composed in the Dravidian meter or vrutham known as "Nathonnata". Kerala has been endowed with abundant rivers and backwaters. Boats ply along these backwaters. Sometimes traditional boat races or Boat Regattas are held. The boat races are spectacular events held during the festival of Onam, the Annual Harvest festival of Kerala during the months of August and September. Long snake-like boats with nearly fifty to sixty rowers participate in these races. These boatsongs are sung during these races by the rowers to maintain the unique rowing rhythm. The lyrics of the boat songs are simple and the themes cover various aspects of the traditional lifestyle of Kerala, the rich culture of the land, the myths, beliefs, legends, even the Puranas. The rhythm of the song coincides with the rowing, the beats and the splashes in the water. The oarsmen throw their oars in perfect unison to the accelerating rhythm of the song. The rhythm is infectious and energizes the rowers.

### HISTORY OF THIS TRADITION

This genre of poetic form was created by Ramapurathu Warier, a poet in Malayalam, who lived in Travancore during the rule of the King AnizhamThirunalMarthandaVarma. Once when he was travelling along with the King in a boat, he recited this poem. The King was impressed. The poem became the famous ' KuchelavritthamVanchipattu'

### 1.2 PULLAVAN PATTU:

<sup>2</sup> Kerala Folklore is unique- N G Nair India Kerala Travel report 2012

This is a ritualistic folk song performed by the Pullavar community as the name indicates, in shrines and temples devoted to ‘Naga Raja’- the king of serpents. The Pullavar community of Kerala are snake worshippers and are closely connected to the serpent worshipping Mulluthara Devi Temple. They consider the ‘snake Gods’ their deity. They perform rituals and sing the praise of the snake deities like Naagarajavu, Naagayakshi, Sarppayakshi and Karinaagam. The Pullavan , male member in the community and Pullavatti, female member sing the songs to the accompaniment of the PulluvanVeena - one stringed instrument, pulluvankudam- earthenware pot with a string attached and thalam – bell metal chimes. The pullavanveena, which resembles a violin , is played with a bow. These instruments are made by the Pulluvars themselves. The songs conducted in temples and snake groves are known as SarpaPaattu, NaagamPaattu , PambamPaattu. Sometimes, the Pullavan and the Pullavathi visit houses, mostly in the rural areas, to present these songs. In return, as a token of gratitude, the duo are given rice and other items. These gifts are a treasure to them as most of them live in abject poverty. The main aspects of PullavanPaattu are the Kalamezhuthu, ( drawing of Kalam), song and SarpaThullal dance.

### MYTH BEHIND THE TRADITION:

‘Legend says Sage Parasurama brought forth the land of Kerala from the seas , gave the Pullavars the right to live by worshipping the snake Gods who are protectors of the Land’.<sup>3</sup> These songs which belong to Dravidian Art are also known as songs of Prosperity. The songs are sung mainly for the Snake-Gods , through the month of Karkidagam (month of July August). It is believed that these songs herald prosperous months ahead.

## 2. FOLK DANCE

Some of the folk songs associated with festivals and rituals are accompanied by solo or group dances.

### 2.1. THIRUVATHIRA KALI:

A traditional colourful dance associated with the festive season of Onam. Performed by ladies of all age groups on the Thiruvathira day in the month of ‘Dhanu’ ( December -January) which is also the birthday of Lord Shiva. The ladies dress in the traditional white Kerala saree or ‘mundu and neriyathu’ while the young girls, in ‘pattupavada’, with sweet fragrant jasmines adorning their hair. A traditional lamp called Vilakku is kept in the center. The group consists of eight to ten dancers . This dance requires coordination of movement amongst the dancers. The dancers form a wide circle and move slowly to the

<sup>3</sup> Jayanthiblogshere.blogspot.com

rhythm of the sung. Their movements are slow. They move clockwise and anticlockwise in the circle. The dance involves graceful body movements with hand gestures. The lyrics of the songs are devotional, mythological or from folk tales too. The songs are called Thiruvathira songs. The dance is very elegant ,enchancing and very popular.

### MYTH BEHIND THE TRADITION:

It was believed that this dance brought back to life Kama Deva ( God of Love) after he was burnt to ashes by the wrath of Lord Shiva. On the day of the performance people stay awake to seek his blessings for eternal marital bliss as they believe that Lord Shiva arrives on that night.

### 2.2. VELAKALI

This is a martial folk art. It is performed in temple courtyards during temple festivals. Earlier menfolk from the Nair community would perform this dance but presently people from all communities perform this. As it is a martial folk art, its dance steps are very spectacular to watch. The Nairs were the warriors of olden times. Hence the dancers who participate in this dance dress in clothes similar to a soldier, carry swords and shields. Here sword canes are used. Their dresses are bright. They wear colorful headdresses in the shape of a cone, garlands, beads to cover their chest, armlets and a waistband. Sometimes, they even wear animal masks to entertain the spectators. Martial music accompanies the dance. The dancers numbering about fifty take war like steps. They march in a line, occasionally stepping out of the line to display some war like movements, sword fights etc. The dancers train well for this performance. The song is accompanied by percussion instruments like thavil, SudhaMaddalam, Elathaalam, Chenda. Besides these trumpets and horns are used. This dance is performed before the temple deity when it is taken out in a procession. This performance is called Thirumumbil Vela.

### MYTH BEHIND THE TRADITION

There are several legends associated with this martial art. One legend is that it depicts a fight sequence between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Another legend tells us of an occasion when Sage Narada witnessed a mock battle between Lord Krishna and his friends on the banks of the river Kalindi. Narada then requested sage Villumangalam to capture the martial vigour of this mock fight in a ritualistic performance for Lord Krishna<sup>4</sup>. This is a regular feature in many temples dedicated to Lord Krishna.

### 2.3 THEYYAM:

One of the most outstanding and ancient folk art of Kerala. It has its origin in North Kerala. Every village performs this ritualistic art hence it is also known as Thirayattom where Thira means village.

<sup>4</sup> Dances of India, Gupta, Shobana (2002) New delhi

Usually performed from the months of December and May. Long hours of preparation and dressing is required for the Theyyam performer. The dress consists of large hood, fascinating headdress, red facial makeup, breast plate, bracelets, garlands, anklets. The fabric attires are very unique and dazzling. They vary according to the role and myth in the form. Musical instruments like chenda, veekuchenda( drums) elathalam and kuzhal or horn are used. Theyyam is usually performed in Bhagavathy Temples. The Devakoothu is the only Theyyam performed by women.<sup>5</sup>

### MYTH BEHIND THIS TRADITION

This is a purely Satvik ritual. The Theyyam performer summons the deities into his body and he becomes possessed. The people then seek the blessings of the Theyyam performer as they consider the elaborate Theyyam ritual as a pathway to God. It is believed to be Tribal worship of Ancestors, heroes, Mother Goddess, animals, serpents. The performer is considered to be the link between the supernatural and the devotees.

### 3. FOLK TRADITION:

#### 3.1 . NIRA PUTHERI

This is a tradition followed in the month of August/September coinciding with the Malayalam month ‘‘Chingam’’. Putheri means new rice. As this marks the beginning of the new harvest season, bunches of paddy plants with ripened grains are offered to the deity in the temples and then are distributed to the devotees.

### LEGEND BEHIND THIS TRADITION:

According to this folklore, the ‘‘Putheri’’ is a symbol of prosperity. When this Putheriprasadam is kept in the homes of the devotees, it is believed that their granaries will get filled. Payasam is also made with the new rice in the temples and distributed to devotees as prasadam.

#### 3.2 ONAPOTTAN:

Traditional art form celebrated during Onam season. Onapottan is a unique folk character enacted by an artist. He is also called Oneshwar or Onathar. He does not speak hence he is known as Pottan – to mean literally ‘‘deaf’’ in Malayalam language. He announces his arrival by ringing the traditional hand bell which he carries in one hand. In the other hand he carries a palm leaf umbrella called the ‘‘Olakkuda.’’ He has elaboratecolourfulcostumes with vibrant facial makeup, heavy crown and bangles. He is also known as OnapottanTheyyam. He is usually accompanied by two other artists who play the Chenda ( drum) and the Ilathalam. ( cymbal)

### MYTH BEHIND THE TRADITION

<sup>5</sup>Devakoothu-the Lone woman Theyyam in North Malabar- Mathrubhumi

According to Mythology, Onam festival celebrates the homecoming of King Mahabali from the nether world. King Mahabali was a Daithya king who ruled Kerala. It is believed that the King visits Kerala once every year during Onam to bless his subjects. The Onapottan represents King Mahabali .The Onapottan visits houses during the festival days of Uthradam and Thiruvonamto bless them with peace and prosperity.

## CONCLUSION

Kerala is proud of its rich, long and traditional cultural history that dates back to early centuries. This colourful cultural legacy has given us many interesting types of art forms like Classical Art forms, Folk Arts, Ritual arts, martial arts covering all castes and creed alike. These various art forms are intertwined with the culture of the land and the lives of the people of the land. They are peculiar and unique to Kerala. They are the signature of this land.

The establishment of the Kerala Folklore Academy, an autonomous centre for Cultural Affairs in June 1995 and located at Chirakkal, Kannur promotes and projects all traditional art forms of Kerala. The Academy encourages research and study in Folklore, has published a book which mentions about 100 folk Art forms of Kerala. It has also published two dictionaries viz: ChavuttuNatakam and Beary Language. It has also identified that as many as thousand folk art forms exist in Kerala. The Academy imparts training in folk arts. Continuous Development, promotion and propagation of these extraordinary art forms is being ensured by the yeoman efforts of this esteemed institution. With such unstinted endeavors by many similar organisations and the community , Kerala will continue to preserve, cherish and sustain its distinctive and rare folklore.

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