



CULTURAL QUALITY OF LIFE AND INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTION OF *KURICHIYA* TRIBE IN WAYANAD

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Abstract: Culture forms the core of tribal identity, encompassing language, rituals, kinship, value systems, and collective memory. The Kurichiya tribe of Wayanad represents one of the most distinctive indigenous communities in Kerala, characterized by matrilineal descent, joint family organization, agricultural self-sufficiency, archery traditions, rich oral literature, and a deeply rooted ritual system. Historically, their social life revolved around clan solidarity, customary leadership, collective labour, and strong moral values such as honesty, religiosity, and social discipline. However, processes of marginalization, economic transformation, land-use changes, restrictions on hunting, and increasing interaction with mainstream society have contributed to gradual shifts in their cultural practices, family structures, food habits, and traditional medical knowledge systems. This study examines the cultural dimensions of the Kurichiya community with special reference to the transformative role of Oorukoottam as a participatory institutional mechanism. The introduction of Oorukoottam created a structured platform for collective decision-making, community interaction, and cultural deliberation, thereby revitalizing community participation and strengthening cultural identity. By situating cultural change within the framework of institutional intervention and community participation, the study argues that Oorukoottam has played a crucial role in reinforcing collective identity, cultural awareness, and social cohesion among the Kurichiya. The findings contribute to broader discussions on how community-based governance mechanisms can support cultural resilience while accommodating social transformation in tribal societies.

Key words: Oorukoottam, Cultural Identity, Matrilineal System (Marumakkathayam), Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Transformation

1. INTRODUCTION:

Culture constitutes the foundation of tribal identity, encompassing language, customs, rituals, social organization, value systems, and collective memory. Among the *Kurichiya* tribe, cultural life has traditionally been rooted in clan solidarity, collective labour, ritual observances, and customary leadership systems. The *Kurichiya* community has historically maintained a distinctive cultural heritage marked by strong kinship ties, agricultural traditions, and a rich body of oral knowledge transmitted across generations. However, due to processes of social marginalization, economic vulnerability, and increasing interaction with external socio-cultural forces, many traditional cultural practices of the *Kurichiya* tribe gradually weakened over time.

In this context, the introduction of *Oorukoottam* as a participatory institutional mechanism marked a significant development in the social organization of the *Kurichiya* community. *Oorukoottam* provided a structured forum for collective interaction, decision-making, and community participation, which had important implications not only for governance but also for cultural life. The regular gatherings and discussions under *Oorukoottam* created opportunities for addressing issues related to customs, festivals, rituals, and collective responsibilities. This institutional space enabled the *Kurichiya* tribe to rearticulate its cultural identity and strengthen community cohesion. Before the launching of *Oorukoottam*, cultural activities among the *Kurichiya* were largely confined to household or clan-level practices, with limited scope for organized community-wide participation. Economic hardship and reduced collective engagement further contributed to the decline of several ritual and festive traditions. Younger members of the *Kurichiya* community showed diminishing involvement in customary practices, resulting in a gradual erosion of cultural continuity. The emergence of *Oorukoottam* altered this situation by encouraging regular collective meetings and participatory decision-making. Through this process, cultural concerns began to receive renewed attention within the *Kurichiya* community.



Elders and traditional leaders found an institutional platform to transmit indigenous knowledge, folklore, and customary norms to younger generations. At the same time, *Oorukoottam* facilitated the adaptation of certain cultural practices to contemporary social conditions, allowing the *Kurichiya* culture to remain relevant while preserving its core values. Thus, the cultural development of the *Kurichiya* tribe after the launching of *Oorukoottam* represents a crucial area of inquiry for understanding how community-based institutions influence cultural continuity and transformation. This study seeks to examine how *Oorukoottam* has shaped cultural awareness, collective participation, and identity formation among the *Kurichiya*, and how traditional practices have been revived, reorganized, or reinterpreted in the post-*Oorukoottam* period.

2. THE CULTURAL ASPECTS OF *KURICHIYA* TRIBES IN WAYANAD DISTRICT:

2.1. Cultural Traits

Numerous cultural traits distinguish the *Kurichiya*, including their housing patterns, chastity observances, hair forelocks, stack, beautifiers, and immolations, all indicating their close ties to the broader Kerala community (Ayappan 1998). Notably, the *Kurichiya* share similarities with early *Nairs*, particularly in their proficiency in archery. According to their claim, the *Kurichiya* are descendants of the *Thekku Perumbadam Villolikari Nairs*, renowned archery experts brought from *Perumbadam* in the south by the *Raja* of Kottayam to combat the *Veda* king of early Wayanad. The term "*Villolikari Nair*" signifies expertise in archery, suggesting that the name *Kurichiya* may be linked to their skill in hunting and accuracy with the bow and arrow (Shashi 1995).

K.S. Singh (2002) notes the fearless character trait of the *Kurichiya*, emphasizing their simplicity and religiosity. Central to their lifestyle is an extraordinary commitment to honesty and truthfulness (Aiyappan 1990), instilled in them through childhood socialization, close interaction with elders, the authority of the *Karanavar*, ritualistic folk songs, fear of their deity, and adherence to rituals and taboos (Panoor 1963). Folk songs, such as "*Naripattu*" and "*Kumbhampattu*," are crucial in legitimizing their uniqueness and perceived superiority over others. Enriched in oral tradition, *Kurichiya*s communicate in a North Malabar dialect of Malayalam at home, employing Malayalam with a distinctive accent when interacting with outsiders (Singh 2002).

2.2. Value System of *Kurichiya*:

The *Kurichiya* tribe is one of the most seasoned occupants of Wayanad. Their social customs, practices and ceremonies are perplexing and intriguing. *Kurichiya*s are distinguished for their unique tribal practice of matrilineal descent, broad joint families, intricate social administration, marriage patterns and association, better status for ladies, hard work, high virtuousness, observation of social distance and pollution. Monetary self-sufficiency, certifiable genuineness, collaborative husbandry, traditional practices and expertise in archery cum-hunting are the hallmarks of *Kurichiya* (E.K. Rajan 2011). No other ethnic community in India has such complex, diverse and rare features as the *Kurichiya*. So much so that they are an exceptionally intriguing lineage enjoying a rare culture and following a village type of living. Regarding the claim of social superiority, certain tribes, like the *Muthuvans* and *Mannans*, assert superiority over others. Of all these tribes, the *Kurichiya* stands out. They believe that they are superior not only to the tribes of Wayanad but to all mortal beings around them (P.K. Balakrishnan 1982).

2.3. Matrimonial Practices:

The *Kurichiya* tribe follows a marriage system of *marumakkathayam* by which the daughter inherits the property and the son-in-law resides in her house. The succession of the family is through nephews. However, the younger generation prefers nuclear families to joint families and prefers a change in the inheritance pattern from *marumakkathayam* to *makkathayam* to pass the inheritance directly to the son. They have also maintained the practice of *Tali-kettu kalyanam* i.e., tying *tali* or a chain before a girl attains puberty. It is her father, or in his absence, the senior uncle of the girl ties the *tali*, and a feast follows. Later, when the girl attains puberty, the real marriage takes place on an auspicious day. The *Pittans* arrange the marriage and the wedding takes place in a very simple manner (Edgar Thurston 1975). The marriage date is fixed on negotiation, and then, as part of the custom, the bridegroom, armed with a bow and arrow, escorted by his relatives and friends, visits the bride's house and gives gifts to the girl and her mother. Then, the *tali kettu* ceremony occurs (Lissy P.P. 2016). The exchange of rings is of recent origin, but the matriarchal rule is strictly observed when selecting a bride (S.S. Shashi 1997). On the day of celebrations, the bridegroom brings a pair of clothes and rings made of white metal or brass as a present for the bride (Edgar Thurston 1975). However, today, the custom is changing, and the marriage is celebrated with different colourful rituals of tying *thali*, and exchanging garlands, rings, and clothes. Nowadays, the marriage ceremony is conducted in the temple as part of the modern enculturation process. Among the *Kurichiya*, the custom of giving dowry and conflict resolution associated with the dowry system is seldom reported, especially among those living in *tharavads* (Susamma Isac 2012).



2.4. Festivals

Recent trends have affected the lifestyle and setup of numerous *Tarawads*, but they have not affected their beliefs and customs. Their rituals and observances are still going on as usual because every *Tarawad* has its tabernacle and divinities. Recently, the '*thira utsavam*' (tabernacle celebration) is conducted by the *Kurichiya* with a large participation of non-tribal people in their adjoining areas. Much of the *Taravads'* income is spent on similar celebrations, observances, and rituals. No fund is collected from family members and third parties (interview schedule). *Kurichiya's* believe in Hinduism and worship Hindu gods and goddesses in addition to their own *Kurichiya* gods and goddesses (Aiyappan 1990).

Generally, *Kurichiya* are orthodox like *Brahmins*. Their practices had some intriguing and inconvenient impacts. These practices were a handicap to them from all walks of life, particularly in educating their children and accepting modern medical treatment (Ayyappan 1990). Unlike other tribes in Kerala, the *Kurichiya* have a 'kitchen culture', a single kitchen for all members of a joint family, and a seasonal menu. In their food pattern, they follow a traditional cuisine. They refuse to eat food cooked by anyone other than a *Kurichiya*. During their long wanderings, they refrain from eating till they have returned home and they enter home only after a purification bath (E K Rajan, 2011).

2.5. Medical Practices

Among the ethnic medical practitioners, *Kurichiya s* have special recognition due to the nature of medical treatments. Educational entitlement of Tribal Communities in Wayanad of herbal drugs and their treatment is complemented by astrological procedures and counselling. *Kurichiya* uses tuberous roots of plants as drugs (Chevalier et al. 2014). They have their approach towards processing it. It is observed that excellent environmental sanitation is maintained around their homes. Like Harappans, their hygiene and neatness of houses, etc., are connected with their religious beliefs and rituals (A. Aiyappan 1992). The restorative climate of Wayanad and the geomorphology of hills and vale must have contributed to their health-related concepts (K. Mahadevan, et al (1993). In the ethnic society, the *Kurichiya's* general life span is longer than any other lineage. The studies of *Kurichiya* by Aiyappan and Mahadevan have revealed several possible reasons for the general longevity and overall health of the senior *Kurichiya* (Aiyappan 1990). Their work pattern also handed them essential physical exercises. A seasonal menu included healthy food habits like ragi and meat as staple foods coupled with regular input of green lush vegetables and tubers. In the beginning, the meat they used was collected only through hunting. A pharmacological analysis of the leafy and root vegetables they consume has reported salutary influence on cardiac protection, deceleration of the ageing process and prevention of diabetes mellitus (Aiyappan 1990).

Above all, the aged *Kurichiya* believe that their strict observation of the distance they maintain with populations for fear of social pollution effectively helps them avoid infection with several transmissible diseases. Even though nutritional problems among the *Kurichiya* have not been reported, their changed food habits in modern times may negatively affect them. Nonetheless, nowadays, they are used to a submissive diet because of the strict prohibition of hunting (Mahadevan 1993). Their inclusion of ragi in the food items was reduced due to the conversion of land for coffee, tea and pepper crop cultivation.

In medical practice, each lineage has its mode of treatment for various conditions, and its practical knowledge has been orally transmitted from one generation to another. Their treatments are primarily linked with religious beliefs, so their ideas of treatment and knowledge about the herbal solutions are not passed on to others because of their belief that their effectiveness would be lost if they did so. KIRTADS, with the help of Tonichal Achappan, an expert in medicinal herbs, started a three-year certificate course in ethnic drugs for 10 tribal scholars at Valad in 1993. As the instructor, *Achappan* could popularize this treatment by sharing it with many. His motto was, "Treatment for all, tutoring only for tribes". Therefore, he could free this treatment from the clutches of traditional superstitions (E K Rajan 2011).

With the changing conditions of the new world, the younger generation is unaware of these medicinal plants. However, the traditional knowledge regarding their treatment is monopolized by some. Poor people from other tribes are also well aware of their treatment and are exploited by this monopoly. There is still a superstition that mantras and gods are more potent than their medicines in their treatment (E.K.Rajan 2011).

3. METHODOLOGY:

The present study examines members of the *Kurichiya* tribal community in Wayanad district of Kerala with the objective of analysing changes in their cultural quality of life before and after the introduction of *Oorukoottam*. A total of 75 respondents, including men and women from different households, were proportionately selected to ensure adequate and balanced representation. Although certain socio-cultural factors influenced responses in some areas, the sampling procedure remained systematic and provided a dependable foundation for analysis.



3.1. Objectives

1. To evaluate the cultural quality of life of the *Kurichiya* community prior to and following the introduction of *Oorukoottam*.
2. To analyse the relationship between cultural quality of life and selected demographic variables such as gender, age, employment status, and educational attainment.

3.2. Hypotheses

1. The cultural quality of life of the *Kurichiya* community has shown significant improvement after the introduction of *Oorukoottam*.
2. Cultural quality of life is significantly related to demographic variables including gender, age, employment status, and level of education.

3.3. Data Sampling:

A stratified sampling technique was employed based on gender, educational status, employment status, and age categories (15–30, 31–45, 46–60, and 61–75). Primary data were gathered using a structured interview schedule comprising 75 items that focused on cultural participation, observance of rituals and festivals, transmission of indigenous knowledge, family cohesion, food practices, traditional medical awareness, and community involvement. Household surveys were carried out across different *Kurichiya* settlements to ensure representation from all strata. Despite field-level challenges such as socio-cultural inhibitions, gender-related constraints, difficult terrain, and logistical issues in remote habitations, the study adhered to methodological rigour, ethical considerations, and ensured the reliability of the collected data throughout the research process.

3.4. Statistical Analysis:

In this section on *Oorukoottam* and cultural quality of life among the *Kurichiya*, the data were collected through twenty key indicators and subjected to appropriate statistical techniques such as the Wilcoxon Rank Test, t-test, and ANOVA. The compiled data and findings are tabulated, analysed, and interpreted wherever relevant to assess changes in cultural participation, identity, and collective life.

3.4.1. Difference in Cultural Quality of Life after *Oorukoottam*

Table 1.

Items	Caste	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p - value
Q1	<i>Kurichiya</i>	192 (98.0%)	191 (97.4%)	0.317
Q2	<i>Kurichiya</i>	193 (98.5%)	178 (90.8%)	0.000
Q3	<i>Kurichiya</i>	77 (39.3%)	171 (87.2%)	0.000
Q4	<i>Kurichiya</i>	78 (39.8%)	137 (69.9%)	0.000
Q5	<i>Kurichiya</i>	173 (88.3%)	32 (16.3%)	0.000
Q6	<i>Kurichiya</i>	195 (99.5%)	159 (81.1%)	0.000
Q7	<i>Kurichiya</i>	95 (48.5%)	44 (22.4%)	0.000
Q8	<i>Kurichiya</i>	148 (75.5%)	49 (25.0%)	0.000
Q9	<i>Kurichiya</i>	0 (0.0%)	11 (5.6%)	0.001
Q10	<i>Kurichiya</i>	147 (75.0%)	105 (53.6%)	0.000

Wilcoxon signed rank test was performed.

***Kurichiya*:** The p-values and the percentages here suggest that in eight out of ten questions, the cultural quality of life was reduced after *Oorukoottam*. The questions are Q2 (Do you prefer to marry outside of your clan?), Q5 (What is your relationship with the mainstream society?), Q6 (Do you practice traditional medicine?), Q7 (Do you face any restrictions in collecting the minor forest produce?), Q8 (Have your traditional food habits changed?) and Q10 (What is your attitude towards the traditional tribal dress style?).



It is also noted that Q3 (Do you think that modern media has a negative impact on traditional tribal lifestyle?) and Q9 (Do you believe in supernatural powers?) were negatively improved after *Oorukoottam*. However, Q4 (How does the mainstream society consider you?) improves after *Oorukoottam*.

There is no change in Q1 (Do you wish to preserve and promote the traditional heritages and celebrations of your tribe?), as the corresponding p-value is more than the significance level.

Findings

Kurichiya tribes register a change in their attitude after the *Oorukoottam* intervention in aspects such as the preference to marry outside the clan, the practice of their traditional medicine, restriction in collecting the minor forest produce, change in traditional food habits, and attitude towards the traditional tribal dress style. *Kurichiya s* are also influenced by the modern media changing their traditional lifestyles and a certain percentage of relaxing traditional belief in supernatural powers.

There is no change in the attitude towards preserving and promoting the traditional heritages and celebrations in the case of both tribes. While *Kurichiya s* show a change in their attitude towards other communities, the *Paniya* registers no change.

Explanation

The *Oorukoottam* program appears to have had varying effects on different aspects of cultural quality within the community. While some traditional practices and beliefs have seen reductions, other aspects have remained consistent or experienced negative changes.

Societies and cultures naturally evolve, and community members adapt to changing circumstances, including the influence of external factors introduced through the *Oorukoottam* programs. Introducing modern elements, media, healthcare, and dietary changes have impacted cultural practices, leading to the observed reductions in cultural quality. Community members' perceptions of traditional practices and beliefs have evolved, potentially influenced by external factors, media, and education, contributing to the changes in cultural quality. Centre for Media Studies (2019) offers data on how modern media influences tribal communities, including perceptions of cultural erosion and changes in traditional beliefs and practices. It should be noted that with the mainstream communities ridiculing and promoting negative propaganda that the tribal heritage is outdated and their celebrations are superstitious, the *Paniya* and *Kurichiya* communities stay rooted in their tradition and heritages. Both *Paniya* and *Kurichiya*, in unison, remain firm on their conviction of maintaining their traditions and culture. In all other aspects, the two tribes register one-to-one correspondence except regarding their attitude towards other communities. In other words, the desire of the tribal communities to preserve their tradition, heritage and celebrations; in short, their cultural traits are found universal, and no modern education or modern development can change this conviction, which the anthropologists call the phenomenon of 'Ethnocentrism' (Sumner 1906).

3.4.2. Difference in Cultural Quality of Life after *Oorukoottam*

Table 2.

Caste	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p – value
<i>Kurichiya</i>	66.22 ± 10.18	54.95 ± 10.50	0.000

Paired sample t-test was performed.

Kurichiya: The p-value here is less than the significance level of 0.05, so the difference in the cultural quality of life after *Oorukoottam* is significant. The table shows that the cultural quality of life is significantly reduced after *Oorukoottam* (54.95 ± 10.50) compared to the cultural quality of life before *Oorukoottam* (66.22 ± 10.18).

Findings

In the case of *Kurichiya*, the cultural quality of life is significantly reduced.

Explanations

The significant reduction in cultural quality of life after *Oorukoottam* is attributed to program-induced changes, shifts in community priorities, the influence of external factors, generational shifts, the erosion of traditional practices, changes in perceptions, and resource allocation. These factors, individually or collectively, contributed to the observed decline in cultural quality within the community. A notable Change in cultural quality reflect generational shifts, with younger community members being influenced by different values and practices than older generations. This



generational divide can contribute to changes in cultural quality. *Oorukoottams* have shifted community priorities away from traditional cultural practices in favor of other aspects of development.

3.4.3. Association between Change in Cultural Quality of Life and Personal Details in *Kurichiya*

Table 3.

Personal Details	Mean	SD	p – value
Age (Years)			
<= 25	-14.87	4.176	0.495
26 – 35	-8.813	2.937	
36 – 45	-10.37	3.308	
46 – 55	-6.773	3.220	
> 55	-9.874	3.462	
Marital Status			
Married	-12.48	1.939	0.271
Unmarried	-7.798	4.019	
Number of Family Members			
1 – 2	-12.15	3.245	0.542
3 – 5	-11.27	2.011	
> 5	-7.002	4.242	
Occupation			
Nil	-8.458	3.685	0.157
Cultivation	-7.744	2.733	
Labour	-8.899	2.721	
Govt. Job	-15.46	3.326	
Educational Qualification			
Uneducated	-7.606	3.674	0.284
Lower Primary	-14.32	4.164	
Upper Primary	-5.039	3.888	
High School	-12.36	2.977	
Higher Secondary	-10.47	3.399	
Under Graduation	-8.337	3.031	
Post Graduation	-12.87	4.115	

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed.

Age: The ANOVA test shows that the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05. The difference in change in the *Kurichiya* cultural quality of life between different age groups is not significant. The table shows that the change in the cultural quality of life is almost the same in the different age groups <=25 years (-14.87 ± 4.176), 26-35 years (-8.813 ± 2.937), 36-45 years (-10.37 ± 3.308), 46-55 years (-6.773 ± 3.220) and >55 years (-9.874 ± 3.462).

Marital Status: The test shows that the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05. The difference in change in the *Kurichiya* cultural quality of life between married and unmarried is not significant. The table shows that the cultural quality of life change is almost the same in married (-12.48 ± 1.939) and unmarried (-7.798 ± 4.019).



The number of Family Members: The test shows that the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05. The difference in change in the *Kurichiya* cultural quality of life between different groups of family members is not significant. The table shows that the change in the cultural quality of life is almost the same in families with 1-2 members (-12.15 ± 3.245), 3-5 members (-11.27 ± 2.011) and >5 members (-7.002 ± 4.242).

Occupation: The ANOVA test shows the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05. The difference in change in the *Kurichiya* cultural quality of life between different occupations is not significant. The table shows that the change in the cultural quality of life is almost the same in cases with “No occupation” (-8.458 ± 3.685), “Cultivation” (-7.744 ± 2.733), “Labour” (-8.899 ± 2.721) and “Government job” (-15.46 ± 3.326).

Educational Qualification: The results show that the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05. The difference in change in the *Kurichiya* cultural quality of life between different qualifications is not significant. The table shows that the change in the cultural quality of life is almost the same in levels of educational qualification.

Findings

In the case of the *Kurichiya* tribe, there is no association between change in cultural quality of life and personal details.

Explanation

The absence of a significant relationship between the cultural quality of life and personal details of *Kurichiya* community is attributed to cultural homogeneity, shared cultural practices, community unity, program design, equal access to cultural resources, and a strong cultural identity within these communities. This finding suggests that communal and cultural factors influenced cultural quality of life more than individual demographic characteristics in this community. It should be noted that compared to all the other aspects of the way of life tested, the specifically symbolic cultural aspects such as traditional heritages, celebrations and life cycle rituals stand out against all other elements. This indicates that to the tribal people, their symbolic culture is much dearer to the tribes than the other socio-cultural aspects such as economic, social, political and educational. According to Anthropological Survey of India Reports that (2018) 92% of *Kurichiya* participants placed high importance on symbolic cultural aspects like traditional heritages, celebrations, and life cycle rituals, compared to 45% for socio-economic and educational aspects.

4. CONCLUSION:

The study examined the impact of *Oorukoottam* on the cultural quality of life of the *Kurichiya* tribe and reveals a complex pattern of continuity and transformation. While *Oorukoottam* created a structured platform for collective interaction, participatory governance, and renewed cultural dialogue, statistical findings indicate a significant decline in several dimensions of cultural quality of life after its introduction. Changes were observed in matrimonial preferences, traditional medical practices, food habits, dress patterns, and attitudes toward mainstream society, reflecting the growing influence of modernization, media exposure, generational shifts, and altered community priorities. However, the study also highlights a strong and unwavering commitment to preserving core symbolic cultural elements such as traditional heritage, rituals, and festivals. This enduring attachment demonstrates the resilience of *Kurichiya* cultural identity despite adaptive transformations in everyday practices. Furthermore, the absence of a significant association between demographic variables and cultural change suggests that these transformations are collective rather than individual in nature, rooted in broader structural and social processes affecting the entire community.

Oorukoottam has functioned both as an agent of institutional strengthening and as a catalyst of cultural transition. While certain traditional practices have weakened, the fundamental cultural consciousness and ethnocentric attachment to heritage among the *Kurichiya* remain intact. The findings underscore that cultural change within tribal communities is not merely a process of erosion, but one of negotiation, adaptation, and selective continuity in response to evolving socio-economic realities.

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