



Cultural Change and the Erosion of Traditional Practices among the Paniya Tribe

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Abstract: Culture constitutes the foundation of human social life, shaping identity, values, belief systems, and patterns of behaviour. Anthropological perspectives emphasize that every human community possesses culture, expressed through its economic organization, social institutions, religious practices, artistic expressions, and systems of knowledge. The present study focuses on the Paniya tribe of Wayanad district, Kerala, examining their cultural quality of life in the context of historical marginalization, socio-economic vulnerability, and contemporary developmental interventions. The Paniya community, historically subjected to landlessness, bonded labour, and social exclusion, has maintained distinctive cultural traditions, including kinship systems, ritual practices, marriage customs, belief systems, and indigenous healing practices. However, processes such as linguistic assimilation, limited access to education, and inadequate implementation of constitutional and policy safeguards have affected the preservation and transmission of their cultural heritage. This study analyses changes in the cultural quality of life of the Paniya community before and after the introduction of Oorukoottam, a participatory governance and community-based development initiative. Using a stratified sampling technique, data were collected from 75 respondents across different age groups, genders, educational levels, and employment categories through a structured interview schedule focusing on cultural participation, traditional practices, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and community cohesion. The findings aim to assess whether Oorukoottam has contributed to strengthening cultural identity, social participation, and overall well-being within the community. The study provides a descriptive and quantitative understanding of cultural transformation among the Paniya tribe in Wayanad.

Keywords: Paniya Tribe, Cultural Quality of Life, Oorukoottam, Tribal Culture, Community Participation; Cultural Transformation

1. INTRODUCTION:

As social beings, individuals are members of a society, and their way of life represents the culture of that society. Edward Taylor (1871) formulated an early definition, stating that culture is a complex whole encompassing moral, beliefs, customs, law, art, knowledge, and other capabilities individuals acquire as society members. There exist over hundred and fifty definitions of culture, with Singh K. emphasizing it as a system of derived needs and an organized system of purposive activities (Singh K 1990). Culture is commonly perceived as synonymous with development or improvement through training and education. A cultured individual is often associated with acquiring specialized skills, refined taste in art, music, and good manners, while those lacking education and manners are deemed "uncultured." However, in Anthropology, the concept of being 'uncultured' or 'cultured' does not exist; 'to be human is to have a culture' (Ralf L. Beals and Hari Hoijer, 1953).

Culture, as seen through this lens, has several general characteristics. Each society possesses its unique culture embodied in organizations like families, groups, and clans, with defined working methods and punishments for violating basic disciplines. There's a profound connection among all aspects of culture, serving the specific goal of promoting the well-being of its members. It is a learned behaviour passed down from generation to generation, social in nature, and intended to gratify human needs, offering accommodation and adaptability to new surroundings (Arul Vijay 2018).

Culture is multifaceted, encompassing five aspects: Economic, Social, Political, Religious, and Artistic. However, these aspects are not rigidly separate, often overlapping so that only a trained person in the discipline can discern them as a whole (Harris 1987). Culture, in its organization, encompasses universals such as Material culture



(Technology and Economics), Social institutions (Social organization, education, political structures), Humans and the Universe (Belief systems, the control of power), Aesthetics (Graphic and plastic arts, folklore, music, drama, and dance), and Language. (Herskovits 1955).

Ethnocentrism, another crucial concept, involves viewing one's way of life as superior to all others. It emphasizes the importance of identifying with one's group, considering its ways as implicitly superior (Herskovits 1955). In this thesis, three main aspects are explored under three heads: Socio-economic, Politico-educational, and Cultural (belief systems, rituals, practices, and celebrations), aiming for a descriptive and quantitative analysis of culture in this chapter.

2. HISTORICAL NARRATION OF THE CULTURAL ASPECTS OF PANIYA TRIBE IN WAYANAD DISTRICT:

The marginalized ethnic communities, despite constitutional provisions, struggle to safeguard and promote their language and culture. Article 19 (5) of the constitution grants cultural or linguistic minorities the right to conserve their language and culture, ensuring the freedom to use their language, exercise their culture, and study their history and heritage (Xaxa 1999). However, the state's efforts to protect and promote minority languages and cultures have been inadequate, failing to align with constitutional provisions (Halavath 2014). Instead of preserving and promoting the unique language and culture of tribal communities, they often assimilate into the language and culture of the larger community due to schooling conducted in the dominant regional language or English. This diminishes awareness of their language and culture among tribal communities. Despite lacking control over resources, tribes have been unable to take effective measures to improve their communities (Halavath 2014).

In support of indigenous people, the Panchayat Extension to the Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act of 1996 empowers listed tribes to safeguard their traditions, customs, cultural identity, community resources, and customary dispute resolution through Gram Sabhas. However, these provisions are not effectively integrated into enacted policies (Halavath, 2014). The *Paniya*, the largest ethnic group in Kerala concentrated in Wayanad, face challenges as a landless community, historically reduced to a slave tribe. Due to traditional practices of untouchability, they remained culturally enslaved even after the abolition of slavery as a crime in 1883. The community, while having its strict discipline, respected the elderly male as the head of the community, the *Mooppan*.

The *Paniya* community exhibits exceptionally strong familial bonds among themselves, fostering a deep connection within their '*kudumbam*' or family. The family structure further extends into clans known as '*kulam*' or '*illam*.' Notably, there is a remarkable absence of gender inequality within their work dynamics. Both spouses actively contribute to daily sustenance through work, with the husband handling provisions after receiving the daily wage while the wife focuses on food preparation. Despite a division of labour, equal rights are enjoyed within the family. Marital fidelity is a significant expectation, and infidelity is dealt with sternly, resulting in rare instances of divorce among the *Paniya* (Madhava Menon 1996). *Paniya* women, or *Paniyathies*, are responsible for caring for their children. After childbirth, they typically avoid strenuous work, dedicating their attention to the child until it becomes self-sufficient. Unlike some other tribes, there is a flexible approach to the isolation of girls at puberty and women during menstruation (Jacob Varghese 2010).

During pregnancy, the *Paniya* community does not observe specific rituals, but there is an expectation for the father to abstain from a diet of fish and meat. In many instances, delivery is assisted by an *atukari* (midwife) from the same community, usually in the husband's house. A practice of isolating the mother for about fifteen days after giving birth is followed, with no male relatives touching the child for the first 39 days. On the fortieth day, a sanctification bath is given to the child (Madhava Menon 1996). A purification ritual called *Punniyham* is performed on the 12th day, where rice mixed with turmeric powder is cooked and served with vegetables to the mother. Post-natal restrictions are observed for one month. The naming ceremony involves the child being bathed by the father's family, adorned in a new dress, and named in the presence of all cousins. The first cereal-feeding ceremony, *pollinate chorutle*, occurs during the fifth month with paternal and maternal uncles and aunts present (Singh K.S 1995). The *kathukuttu kalyanam* (ear-piercing ceremony) is performed in the presence of the mother's family (Jacob Varghese 2010).

Following puberty, *Paniya* girls undergo a custom where they are isolated in a separate hut for seven days. On the eighth day, they are given a bath and taken home, and the shed is dismantled and burned along with old clothes (Jacob Varghese 2010). Marriages are primarily arranged within the family, with the boy seeking a bride from his uncle's daughter. If unavailable, he can marry a girl from outside, preferably a father's sister's daughter or a mother's brother's daughter. Marriage typically occurs after the girl reaches puberty (T Madhava Menon 1996). Various customs accompany the marriage ceremony, officiated by a priest or elders in the priest's absence. The father of the bride is expected to pay the bridegroom the bride-prize. Widows are allowed remarriage, and in the *Paniya* community,



husbands must pay an annual subscription fee called "*Thalapattom*" to the wife's parents on the day of "*Uchal*" (annual festival), or the bride's parents can recall their daughter (Jacob Varghese 2010).

Marriage among the *Paniya* community is typically arranged after puberty, and adherence to monogamy is a common practice. The process involves the groom's parents initiating negotiations to marry their daughter, with the headman confirming the marriage after ensuring it adheres to exogamous principles. In cases where the agreed-upon bride price cannot be paid, the husband can serve the bride's parents. There are instances where service and bride price are insisted upon (Luiz A D 1962). Some clans believe in a regular annual contribution to the wife's parents, and failure to make this contribution has led to instances where the wife is forced to stay away from her husband. This customary contribution often includes colourful beads and new clothes (Luiz A D 1962). Traditional customs, folk songs, and folklore among the *Paniya* community reflect primitive methods of marriage, such as capture, elopement, or exchange. The old custom of the groom being bathed by the headman has been discontinued. Eating together is a crucial aspect of their marriage ceremonies. Divorce and desertion are rare due to an edict allowing a man to kill his adulterous wife. Widows or divorced women can marry whomever they choose (Jacob Varghese 2010).

The *Paniya* community's dress code is simple and distinctive, setting them apart from other ethnic communities. Males wear a long cloth (*Mundu*) wrapped around the waist, and a small '*mundu*' is worn over the shoulders to cover the body. *Paniya* women, known as '*Panichis*,' wear a long cloth on the loins and a small one above the bosom through the armpits. A coloured scarf, either red or black, referred to as '*arati*,' is tied around the waist of women (R.P. Prasad 1998). The traditional religious beliefs of the *Paniya* community fall under the categories of animistic or totemic, encompassing the broader realm of nature worship. While some continue to practice these traditions, many have embraced other religions, such as Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, often influenced by their masters or *Yajaman* (Luiz A D 1962). Even those who adopt other religions often continue to practice their traditional religious rites covertly (Luiz A D 1962).

The *Paniya* community exhibits flexibility in their choice of deity, with some believing in a supreme God known as '*Ippimala Teyya*.' In other instances, worship is directed towards *Kattu Bagavathi* (god of the jungle), and the family deity is *Guliyar* or *Illateyya*. In these sacred spaces, images of deities are absent, yet every settlement hosts a petite platform referred to as "*tina*," regarded as the abode of spirits. *Paniyas* also acknowledge the existence of good and evil spirits, seeking to appease them through various rituals, spirited dances, and festivals. Trees are considered abodes of spirits, with some believe to be haunted by evil entities, making them off-limits for touch or cutting. Settlements appoint priests, known as *Nolambukaran*, to oversee shrines. Additionally, *Paniyas* believe in gods and goddesses, attributing divinity to the sun as the god of the day and the moon as the god of the night. Sacrifices are offered to these deities during rituals and festive occasions. The community observes various festivals yearly, some specific to them, while others are celebrated widely in the state (Jacob Varghese 2010). An essential religious function involves exorcising gods, spirits of the dead, and evil spirits believed to possess individuals. There are "ordinary mediums" who seek the blessings of various deities and "sorcerers" practising trades like clairvoyance and tarot readings. *Vaidyakkars*, considered medical practitioners, claim the ability to cure ailments by drinking blood and using magic sticks to remove harmful foreign objects from the body (Aiyappan 1992).

The *Paniya* follow distinctive burial practices, where the young are interred, and the elderly undergo cremation. Graves are excavated uniquely, situated at the base of a trench around five feet deep, oriented north to south. A room within the west wall accommodates the body, shrouded in a mat. The trench is filled in after placing the deceased in this space and adding cooked rice for the spirit (Madras District Gazetteer 1908). For seven days following the burial, relatives refrain from consuming meat and fish, presenting rice porridge at a distance from the grave. The *kuttan* signals evil spirits by clapping his hands, beckoning them to accept the offering. Mourning ceremonies typically occur in the month of *Magaram* (January-February), during which those who lost relatives in the year prepare food in a special shed outside the village, abstaining from meat or fish. On the month's last day, relatives assemble near the shed, where the *Kuttan* or *Janmi* circumambulates the grave thrice, holding two winnowing sieves filled with paddy, later offered at the centre. Subsequently, the *Komaran* or *Theyyam*, a professional soothsayer adorned with a new towel around his head, body covered in rice flour and ghee, and anklets, expels evil spirits through a vigorous dance with small sticks, culminating in his collapse. The gathered mourners then seek guidance from the *Komaram* on behaving in a manner pleasing to the spirit (Jacob Varghese 2000).

3. METHODOLOGY:

The present study examines members of the *Paniya* 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*. The *Paniya* community, traditionally rooted in agrarian labour systems and community-based living, possesses distinct cultural practices, social organisation, and indigenous knowledge systems that shape their everyday life. A total of 75



respondents, including men and women from different households, were proportionately selected to ensure adequate and balanced representation. Care was taken to respect community norms, traditional leadership structures, and local customs during data collection. Although certain socio-cultural factors, such as hesitation in expressing personal views and gender-based communication patterns, 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 *Paniya* 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 *Paniya* 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 focusing on cultural participation, observance of rituals and festivals, transmission of traditional knowledge, intergenerational bonding, food practices, awareness of indigenous healing practices, labour patterns, and participation in community gatherings. Household surveys were conducted across different *Paniya* settlements (colonies and hamlets) in Wayanad to ensure representation from all selected strata. Special attention was given to culturally appropriate communication methods, including the use of the local dialect and community mediators when necessary. Despite field-level challenges such as socio-cultural inhibitions, limited literacy levels, gender-related constraints, difficult terrain, economic vulnerabilities, and logistical issues in remote habitations, the study maintained methodological rigour and adhered to ethical considerations. Informed consent was obtained, confidentiality was ensured, and the reliability of the collected data was maintained throughout the research process.

4. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS:

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>Paniya</i>	187 (96.4%)	188 (96.9%)	0.317
Q2	<i>Paniya</i>	190 (97.9%)	156 (80.4%)	0.000
Q3	<i>Paniya</i>	42 (21.6%)	85 (43.8%)	0.000
Q4	<i>Paniya</i>	3 (1.5%)	6 (3.1%)	0.317
Q5	<i>Paniya</i>	191 (98.5%)	189 (97.4%)	0.480
Q6	<i>Paniya</i>	191 (98.5%)	172 (88.7%)	0.000
Q7	<i>Paniya</i>	84 (43.3%)	52 (26.8%)	0.000
Q8	<i>Paniya</i>	135 (69.6%)	29 (14.9%)	0.000
Q9	<i>Paniya</i>	0 (0.0%)	10 (5.2%)	0.002
Q10	<i>Paniya</i>	194 (100.0%)	166 (85.6%)	0.000

Wilcoxon signed rank test was performed.

Based on the Wilcoxon rank test, the p-values ($p < 0.05$) and the percentages of seven out of ten questions suggest that the cultural quality of life reduced after introducing *Oorukoottam*. Q2 (Do you prefer to marry outside of your clan?), 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 (Are you against supernatural powers?) showed a negative trend after the introduction of *Oorukoottam* as p-values are less than the significance level. There is no change in Q1 (Do you wish to preserve and promote the traditional heritages & celebrations of your tribe?) Q4 (How does the mainstream society consider you?) and Q5 (What is your relationship with the mainstream society?) as corresponding p-values are more than the significance level.

Findings

The results from the Wilcoxon rank test show a reduction in cultural quality of life after the introduction of *Oorukoottam*, specifically in seven out of ten questions.

Explanation

The decreased cultural quality may indicate that the *Oorukoottam* program led to a shift in preferences, with a reduced inclination to marry outside one's clan. This could be seen as a move away from traditional practices. A decrease in the practice of traditional medicine might suggest that modern healthcare or alternative medical practices introduced through *Oorukoottam* have gained precedence over traditional healing methods. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India (2018) shows the data of modern healthcare practices among tribal communities has increased from 35% in 2005 to 60% in 2018. The usage of traditional medicine has decreased from 40% in 2005 to 20% in 2018. A reduction in cultural quality in this context could indicate changes in dietary preferences and the adoption of non-traditional food habits influenced by mainstream society. National Institute of Nutrition (2017) Provides data on changes in dietary habits among tribal populations, highlighting shifts from traditional diets to more mainstream food habits. A decrease in cultural quality related to traditional dress styles suggests that community members are becoming less attached to or less likely to wear traditional tribal attire due to the impact of modern media. The negative feeling seen in the study suggests that community members perceive modern media as having a detrimental impact on traditional tribal lifestyles. This indicates concerns about cultural erosion due to outside influences and the perception of supernatural powers within the community is leading to a decrease in belief in such powers. 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.

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

Table 2.

Caste	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p – value
<i>Paniya</i>	62.73 ± 7.836	54.28 ± 9.090	0.000

Paired sample t-test was performed.

The p-value is less than the significance level of 0.05 and 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* (54.28 ± 9.090) compared to the cultural quality of life before *Oorukoottam* (62.73 ± 7.836).

Findings

In the case of *Paniya* 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.

4.3. Association between Change in Cultural Quality of Life and Personal Details in *Paniya*

Table 3.



Personal Details	Mean	SD	p - value
Age (Years)			
<= 25	-5.474	3.068	0.924
26 – 35	-5.036	2.483	
36 – 45	-3.399	2.878	
46 – 55	-3.643	3.174	
> 55	-3.754	3.289	
Marital Status			
Married	-5.918	2.576	0.211
Unmarried	-2.605	2.965	
Number of Family Members			
1 – 2	-3.638	3.081	0.853
3 – 5	-4.169	2.498	
> 5	-4.977	2.623	
Occupation			
Nil	-11.94	4.259	0.154
Cultivation	7.283	7.468	
Labour	-5.632	1.732	
Govt. Job	-6.758	2.854	
Educational Qualification			
Uneducated	-7.062	2.893	0.194
Lower Primary	-0.547	3.637	
Upper Primary	-6.228	3.196	
High School	-6.895	2.870	
Higher Secondary	-4.829	2.919	
Under Graduation	0.056	4.232	
Post Graduation	-4.325	5.321	

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed.

Age: The ANOVA test shows that the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05, so the difference in change in the 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 case Age group <=25 years (-5.474 ± 3.068), 26-35 years (-5.036 ± 2.483), 36-45 years (-3.399 ± 2.878), 46-55 years (-3.643 ± 3.174) and >55 years (-3.754 ± 3.289).



Marital Status: It also shows that the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05 and so the difference in change in the cultural quality of life between married and unmarried *Paniya* is not significant. The table shows that the change in the cultural quality of life is almost the same in married (-5.918 ± 2.576) and unmarried (-2.605 ± 2.965).

The number of Family Members: The test shows that the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05, so the difference in change in the 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 (-3.638 ± 3.081), 3-5 members (-4.169 ± 2.498) and >5 members (-4.977 ± 2.623).

Occupation: The ANOVA test shows that the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05, so the difference in change in the 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 different items, "No occupation" (-11.94 ± 4.259), "Cultivation" (7.283 ± 7.468), "Labour" (-5.632 ± 1.732) and "Government job" (-6.758 ± 2.854).

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

Findings

The finding is that there is no association between change in cultural quality of life and personal details in the case of *Paniya*.

Explanation

The *Paniya* community has a relatively homogenous cultural identity and values, which could result in a shared cultural quality of life across different demographic groups. In such communities, individual characteristics have less influence on the cultural quality of life. It is also possible that cultural practices and values are consistent across different demographic groups within these communities. As a result, the influence of age, marital status, family size, occupation, and educational qualifications on cultural quality of life is limited. *Paniya* community have strong social cohesion and unity, which could overshadow individual demographic characteristics regarding cultural aspects. In such close-knit communities, cultural quality of life is more influenced by communal factors. Culture, understood as a way of life of people, is all-pervasive in that it permeates every aspect of personality, whether simple or complex cultures. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India (2019) Reports that 85% of *Paniya* respondents indicated that cultural practices and values remained consistent across different demographic groups. But 90% reported that their cultural quality of life was more influenced by communal factors rather than individual characteristics.

5. CONCLUSION:

The study reveals that while the *Paniya* community of Wayanad continues to retain a strong sense of collective identity and social cohesion, the introduction of *Oorukoottam* has coincided with a significant decline in certain dimensions of their cultural quality of life. Statistical analysis indicates noticeable shifts in traditional practices such as marriage preferences, food habits, dress patterns, and reliance on indigenous medicine, suggesting gradual cultural transformation influenced by modernization, media exposure, and developmental interventions. At the same time, the absence of significant association between demographic variables and cultural change highlights the homogenous and community-centered nature of *Paniya* cultural life, where shared values and collective experiences outweigh individual differences. The findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive development policies that balance socio-economic progress with the preservation of indigenous traditions. Sustainable transformation among the *Paniya* should therefore integrate community participation with conscious efforts to safeguard their cultural heritage, ensuring that development does not lead to cultural erosion but to culturally rooted empowerment.

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