



## தமிழ்மணம் சர்வதேசத் தமிழ் ஆய்விதழ்

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# Cultural Traditions of The Irulas at Attukal: A Historical Study of Music and Folk Arts

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### ABSTRACT

*The Irulas are one of the major tribal communities of South India, living mainly in the foothills and forested regions of the Western Ghats. This study focuses on the cultural traditions of the Irulas of Attukal, a tribal settlement near Thondamuthur in Coimbatore district, with special reference to their music and folk arts. Folk songs occupy an important place in their cultural life and are sung on various occasions, including agricultural activities, religious rituals, courtship, funerals, and social gatherings. These songs reflect the community's emotions, beliefs, occupations, and social values. The study also examines the traditional musical instruments used by the Irulas, such as the manparai, dhavil, kogalu, and jaldra, which are made from locally available materials and form an integral part of their cultural practices. Dance performances, particularly kummi and other ceremonial dances, are closely associated with festivals and life-cycle events such as marriages, funerals, and puberty rites. In addition, the folk tales of the Irulas provide valuable insights into their worldview, religious beliefs, and social customs. Using historical and ethnographic methods, this study highlights the role of oral traditions and folk arts in preserving the cultural identity and collective memory of the Attukal Irulas. The paper emphasizes the importance of documenting and safeguarding these traditions, which continue to enrich the cultural heritage and diversity of Tamil Nadu.*

**Keywords:** *Irulas, Attukal, Folk Music, Folk Arts, Cultural Heritage.*

### Introduction

A tribe is a close-knit community of people who often live in forested areas, embracing a simple and traditional way of life.<sup>1</sup> They may not have access to formal education and often face economic challenges, which can lead to a modest lifestyle. Their attire is typically minimal, reflecting their connection to nature. These communities are deeply rooted in their own customs



and traditions, with marriages usually occurring within the group. Their daily activities revolve around foraging for fruits, roots, and shoots, as well as hunting for food.

Tribal members tend to be unaware of the broader political and economic landscape of their country, often preferring to maintain their way of life without outside influence.<sup>ii</sup> They can be wary of strangers and may resist external efforts aimed at development, valuing their unique culture and identity above all.

### Attukal Irulas

The Irular people are one of the largest tribal groups in South India, residing mainly in the lush Western Ghats of the Coimbatore district.<sup>iii</sup> Their name, *Irula* translates to “one who comes from the darkness,” which may stem from their traditional lifestyle in the dense forests at lower elevations.<sup>iv</sup> This term likely has roots in the Tamil word “irul”, meaning darkness, and could refer to their dark skin or the fact that many significant events in their culture traditionally occur at night.<sup>v</sup> Within their community, they also identify as Erlar or Poosari. However, their neighbors refer to them by various names, including Eralollu, Irulas, Shikari, and Pujari.<sup>vi</sup> The Irular people have a rich cultural heritage, deeply connected to their environment and traditions.

Tribes of Attukal, Thondamuthur in Coimbatore district are one among the group of Irulas in Tamil Nadu. They consist of 70 families with the population of approximately 300. They are generally reluctant to speak their language, sing their songs before non – Irulas. They are nature lovers, animals and trees are also worshipped. Most of the people worship deities namely *Vettaikkaraswami* in *Perumal mudi* hills.<sup>vii</sup> Festivals for this deity are celebrated in the month of October (Purattasi). Attukal Irulas prefer love marriages. Slight variations are seen in their languages compared to other Irulas. The Tribes of Attukal are generally agricultural labourers. They indulge in the collection of minor forest products. At present, they are engaged in animal husbandry, broom stick making etc.

### Folk Songs

Tribal society is an area of vast musical wealth. From meaningless vocals to story songs, the song is a feature. The songs they sing belong to different categories: they are nature, god and society in general.<sup>viii</sup> Their music refers to farm songs, ballads, magical songs and pastoral songs. It is a way to express their core feelings. The folk songs consist of five types of ballads. They are *Tena pattu* and *Sameyokka pattu*, *Pea pattu*, love ballads, funeral songs and melody of other tunes. Their language is a mixture of Tamil, Kannada and Telugu. So we can't understand their lyrics without the knowledge of their language. There is a song for every event from birth to death, emotion and occasion unique to the Irulas that have been passed down orally for generations.

#### 1. Tena pattu and Sameyokka pattu

In the early days, the Irulas cultivated two key crops. They are samai and thinai. Their culture and literature naturally revolve around these important grains.<sup>ix</sup> The folk songs they created reflect this connection; for instance, the songs sung during the cultivation of *Thinai* are known as *Thinapattu*, while *Sameyokka pattu* is sung during the threshing of *Samai*. These millet songs accompany various stages of farming, from sowing to weeding and harvesting, capturing the rhythms of their agricultural life.

#### 2. Pea pattu

During their special worship rituals, the Irulas sing a unique type of song known as pea pattu. Living deep in the jungle, their temples are nestled within this lush environment.<sup>x</sup> Many Irulas enter a trance-like state, either through focused meditation or influenced by the rhythmic sounds of drums and flutes. In these moments, they often break into vibrant dances. The hymns

they sing in praise of their deities during these occasions are the heartfelt *Pea pattu*, expressing their devotion and connection to the divine.

### 3. Love song

Most of the popular songs of the Attukal Irulas are centered on love. These songs give insights into private lives and sexual relationship.

#### Rangamma:

*Rottora veetukari Pulla rangamma*  
*Rojapoo silaikari Pulla rangamma*  
*Thilley ley... leyley...lo... thiley*  
*Seevi mudinja konda pulla rangamma*  
*Idadhu pakka saaya konda pulla rangamma*  
*Thille ley...leyley... lo... thille thillelo (2)*  
*Ennaal karuppu selai pula rangamma*  
*Ennai mayakkudhadi pulla rangamma*  
*Thilley ley...*  
*Paththu mani neramagum pulla rangamma*  
*Pathirundhalagadhadi pulla rangamma*  
*La la... la la... la la... Thilley ley... leyley...lo...*  
*Ooruku mevarama pulla rangama*  
*Unnai mattum paarpenadi pulla rangama*  
*Thilley...*

This song expresses their love and the boy conveys message to his pair regarding what colour dress she needs to wear; at what time they have to meet. In addition, he describes the beauty of his partner by various comparisons. In between they put some words (*thilley ley*) for the music.<sup>xi</sup> These songs were sung in the gathering. He indirectly transforms the message to his lover in festival occasions.

### 4. Funeral song

Funerals are the theatrical performances that take place during a funeral or as part of a posthumous ceremony. The songs are often a prayer for the good of the departed and the country.

*Aththipattai aalampattai*  
*Aala mayakkudhu velampattai*  
*Kaanjanam pattai karuvelam pattai*  
*Kanney kasakkudhu kallipattai*  
*Kudikka kudikka pachai thanni*  
*Kudichu partha saaraya thanni*  
*Thaanananey thanananey thaney naaney thanananey*  
*Thille ley ley thillo thilley ley lo thillelelo*  
*Saavu sethaalum aatamillai*  
*Nalladhu kettadhukum aatamillai*  
*Appatha kaalathi aani aana*  
*Aattam pattam aadinaru*  
*Ippathi kalatha aani aana*  
*Rodu roda suthugaru*  
*Thanananey thananey thaney naaney thananey*  
*Emadhu naadu mela naadu*  
*Ippatha naadu seema naadu*  
*Naadum ketupochu thille leylo*

*Eerum ketupochu thilleleylo – (Aththipatttai aalampattai...)<sup>xii</sup>*

Dance and Song were the indispensable things during funeral ceremony. In the above song, tribes are describing the cultural practices during funeral like toddy drinking, dancing and the manufacturing process of toddy. It also explains the ill efforts of it. In addition to it, the cultural changes from ancient to modern period are also quoted. The features of their land as hills and now it becomes city and how exploitation affected are some of the things mentioned in this song.

### 5. Songs for other occasions

The Irulas have a rich tradition of songs for various occasions, including betrothals, marriages, and social gatherings, which can be categorized as miscellaneous. One special type of song is sung by the daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law, reflecting their unique bond. Additionally, lullabies hold a cherished place in their folk song repertoire, soothing and nurturing the next generation. These songs not only celebrate important life events but also strengthen familial ties and cultural identity.

### Musical Instruments

The Irulas are truly gifted musicians, showcasing their talents in both singing and playing instruments. Instrumental music holds a special place in their hearts and is an essential part of important occasions like weddings, funerals, and social festivals.<sup>xiii</sup> They have four main types of musical instruments: the *manparai*, *dhavil*, *kogalu*, and *jaldra*. Among these, the *kogalu*, a type of flute, plays a significant role in their musical expressions. What's remarkable is that all these instruments are crafted from local materials, reflecting their deep connection to their environment and traditions.

### Dance

The Irulas celebrate their culture through vibrant group dancing during festivals and important life events like marriages, funerals, and puberty rites, known as the *kummi* dance.<sup>xiv</sup> They have a treasure trove of songs for various dances, including favorites like *Dunpattu*, *Odayooru*, *Thekkumala*, and *Valli Valli*. While they typically don't sing during the dances, the rhythm comes alive through the beats of drums and the melodies of pipes.

In these dances, men often raise their hands and wave them playfully in front of their faces, while women gracefully lift their hands to shoulder level, moving them side to side with open palms and rotating their wrists in a rhythmic flow. Children joyfully mimic the movements of the women, adding to the lively atmosphere. The pipers skillfully adapt their tunes to match the occasion, creating a unique ambience. Particularly captivating are the funeral dances performed at night, which leave a lasting impression on newcomers.

### Folk Tales

The Irulas also have numerous folk tales, which reflect the tribe's family and social life. The Irulas believe that supernatural powers dominate their earthly lives. Their faith in witchcraft, ghosts, sorcery and black magic reveals fear and superstition. Some of the tales centre on imaginative aspects of their life.<sup>xv</sup> As in any society, the Irulas have stories about the adventures of kings, queens, princes and their retinue. There are also plenty of stories of serpents.

### Conclusion

The Irulas of Attukal possess a rich cultural heritage that is reflected in their music, folk songs, dances, musical instruments, and oral traditions. These art forms are not merely sources of entertainment but are closely connected to their everyday life, beliefs, customs, occupations, and social relationships. Through their songs and performances, the Irulas express their emotions, preserve their traditions, and pass on their cultural knowledge from one generation to the next.

This study highlights the importance of folk arts as a valuable source for understanding the history and culture of the Attukal Irulas. Their agricultural songs, love ballads, ritual songs, funeral songs, dances, and folk tales provide insights into their worldview and way of life. The indigenous musical instruments used during various ceremonies further demonstrate their creativity and close relationship with nature.

Although social and economic changes have influenced tribal life in recent years, many traditional practices continue to survive among the Irulas. Therefore, there is a need to document, preserve, and promote these unique cultural traditions for future generations. Further research on the oral traditions, language, customs, and folk arts of the Irulas will help bring greater recognition to their contribution to the cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu and enrich our understanding of tribal history and society.

\*I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work

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