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Coastal Folklore Artforms

¹George Joseph Cherupunathil, ²V. Lakshmi

¹Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor of Vocal Music

Kalai Kaviri College of Fine Arts

Tiruchirappali

¹ajaygullu@gmail.com, ²lakshmikk036@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the coastal folk-art traditions of Kerala, with particular focus on the artists, practitioners, and enthusiasts who have sustained these forms across generations. Although culturally rich and historically significant, many of these traditions have not received the recognition and preservation necessary for their continued survival. Among them, the devotional song tradition influenced by both medieval Christian European culture and Dravidian heritage is known as *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu*. A related form, *piṇṇappāṭṭu*, continues to be performed by the Annuli community of Alappuzha district in Kerala. Another devotional composition, written by the German priest Johann Ernst Hanxleden (popularly known as Arnos Pathiri), is called *puttanpāna*. Songs composed by Kuḷattūr Vēdanāyakaṁ Piḷḷai are referred to as *ammānapāṭṭu*, composed using *pāvu* structures such as *venbā*, *vañcippā*, *kalippā*, and *āyarippā*, along with musical forms such as *isai*, *kaviturai*, and *viruttam*. During the mid-sixteenth century, the art form *paricamuṭṭukaḷi* emerged from the martial traditions of Kerala. This study explores these coastal traditions in order to understand their literary, musical, historical, and cultural significance.

Keywords: *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu*; *piṇṇappāṭṭu*; *puttanpāna*; *ammānapāṭṭu*; *ślāmākarōḷi*; *caviṭṭu nāṭakam*

1.0 Introduction

In 1502, when the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama arrived in Kochi, Christian communities extending from Koḍuṇṇallūr to Villāṛvaṭṭam welcomed him and expressed their willingness to come under the protection of the Portuguese

crown. Following this, agreements between the ruler of Kochi and the Portuguese facilitated the protection and expansion of Christian communities in the region. During this period, particularly in coastal areas influenced by European missionaries, several folk performance traditions flourished, including *grāmīṇa pesahāpāṭṭu*, *dēvastāvīḷi*, and *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu*.

These traditions reveal how religion, ritual, music, and performance became deeply interconnected among the Christians of Kerala. From North Chavakkad to South Kollam, many ritual-based art forms evolved, such as *mārgamkali*, *kalyāṇapāṭṭu*, *paḷlipāṭṭu*, *rambāṇpāṭṭu*, and *ōḍipāṭṭu*. This article explores selected coastal folk-art forms not only to appreciate their cultural importance but also to examine their contribution to the evolution and revival of musical traditions, including their relationship with classical music.

2.0 Literature Review

The major sources for this study include the works of Dr. Fr. Joseph Valiyavīṭil, particularly *Caviṭṭu Nāṭaka Vijñānakōśam*, *Kaḍalōra Kalārūpannaḷ Directory*, and *Tiradēśa Kalānighaṇḍu*, which document the artistic expressions of Kerala's coastal communities. These texts provide essential historical and descriptive material for understanding the development and practice of these traditions.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. The analysis is based primarily on books, research articles, and online journals. It also includes supporting materials such as performance videos, documentaries, interviews, and archival content available on websites and social media platforms. Since the study is centred on performance, music, and oral traditions, with particular emphasis on auditory analysis, no experimental methods were employed.

3.1 Analysis, Results and Discussion

3.1.1 aṇṇāvipāṭṭu

aṇṇāvipāṭṭu are Christian folk songs sung during Holy week that illustrate the passion of Christ. They go from one home to another, singing in honor of Lord Jesus and his sufferings and ultimate sacrifice. It is occasionally referred to as *grāmīṇa pesahāpāṭṭu* (rural) or *piṇṇappāṭṭu*. The manner of singing possesses a shade of both Dravidian tradition and European culture. The typical instruments

accompanied are *jālaṛ* and *caplāṇkaṭṭa* (*kheartāl/cipli*). At times, they primarily utilize *maramaṇi*, the wooden spinning ratchet sound maker referred to as *matrāka/crotalus* or grogger, which is employed during holy mass, particularly on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. It is observed that additional instruments like Tabla, Harmonium, Violin, etc., are incorporated into this artform later. It is sometimes referred to as *mātāvaṇakkapāṭṭu* because these folk musicians also sing in honor of Mother Mary.

Since ancient times, a considerable amount of *tamizh isai* can be observed in *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu* as it was utilized in dance styles such as *paḍēṇi*, *vēlakali*, *muḍiyēṭṭu*, and so on. Subsequently, it found application in songs for *caviṭṭu nāṭakaṁ*. The lyrics were created in the 16th century. Consequently, the style of composition, language and dialects, tunes, and *rāga*-s of *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu* resemble those of *caviṭṭu nāṭakaṁ* to some extent. An example is shown below;

'*nakṣatra muḍiyaṇintān kaṇṇimatṛvē rakṣittānuruḷumeṇṭe eḷiyaputrare*'

The practice of singing from house to house was inspired by Europe, where a troupe of singers would travel door to door, in praise of Emperor Charlemagne with their songs. This contributed to the expansion of the Christian community in *kēraḷa*. The composers of the earliest *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu* and *mātāvaṇakkapāṭṭu* created with *tamizh* prosodies, *seṇtamizh*, and *manipravāḷa* (*malayāḷaṁ* - *tamizh*), are believed to be the European missionaries who resided in *kēraḷa*.

Between 1567 and 1579, *koccirājavu* and *mūtēḍattu iḷayaḍattu svarupaṇṇaḷ* granted the missionaries permission to construct churches near 30 Christian monuments and also to those individuals willing to convert to Christianity. These missionaries subsequently chose and established several vocal groups and created songs in a folk style. It was at this time, the *aṇṇāvi*-s and *āśaṇ*-s associated with *caviṭṭu nāṭakaṁ* emerged.

According to *tamizh paṇ* music system, the songs are designed as per *neytal* - The sea and places related to the sea. The lead singer is called *āśaṇ*. He sings first and the repetition is sung by his disciples. Another style includes where everyone sings in unison. In 1870, when the auxiliary bishop of verapoly, Dr.

Marcellinus wrote the 'May month prayer to Mary' (*mātāvinṭe vaṇakka māsa prārthana*), that became the source of composing *mātāvaṇakkapāṭṭu*. It is sung after the daily evening prayer. In the ancient *kēraḷa*, when the buddhist monks roamed around preaching the teachings of *buddha*, they used to visit door to door singing songs while requesting alms. These songs later became the inspiration to the creation of *piṇṇappāṭṭu* sung in southern regions. All these folk songs are mostly written in *tamizh* verses using the figurative elements or literary ornamentation in a very elegant manner by the lyricists, such as *pādādi poruttam*, *dvityakṣara prāsam* (*edugai*), *ghaḍaka prāsam* (*monai*), *antya prāsam*, etc.

There are around 300 *kṛti*-s including the *isai* of *karalsman* (Charlemagne). It has been discovered that the combination of *edugai* and *monai* found in the text, which was called *pāṭṭu*. Also, other figurative elements such as *iyaibu*, *muraṇ*, *aḷapaḍai*, *aḍukkumozhi* are also used. It is also found that four *ceiyyul* namely *venbā*, *āsiriyappa*, *kalippā* and *vancippā* have been used in the lyrics.

e.g.; *umatumakan śiṣyarkaḷe pantiyilveccu*

ukappāka kāl kazhuki umai colli

Besides these figurative elements, *pāṭṭu*-s like *kavi*, *tuṛai*, *isai*, *viruttam* and for each of them like *ēśal*, *kavi*, *cīṭṭukavi*, *kalittuṛai*, *innisai*, *tāzhisai* are also used. Some of the *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu* are composed in *kāvaḍi cintu*.

e.g. *nakṣatramuḍi aṇintān kannimāṭṭvē*

rakṣittanaruḷuminta eḷiya putrare

~ *vaṇakkapāṭṭu* (*kāvaḍi cintu*)

e.g. *aṃbarane āraṇane amalōneparapporuḷē*

aḍiyanuḍe piṇṇai poṭuttu avitaṃ tantaruḷ parane

~ *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu* (*kāvaḍi cintu*)

Now, coming to musical terms, *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu* shares some similarities with *kaṇṇāṭak* music. *rāga*-s like *harikāmbōji*, *ānanda bhairavi*, *śaṃkarābharaṇam* which are found in *tamizh* music can be considered that might have been used in *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu* too. Also, the 'opera' derived from the western influence can be seen in some songs. Since these songs are sung in groups, they are seen singing in western

manner. Some are sung using *rāga-s* and *tāla-s* used in gregorian music system.

e.g.; *aṇṇaṁ mariye maṇṇar gōtriye*

maṇṇar poṭṭuṁ mahimai cērtaye

- *vaṇakkapāṭṭu*

The *tamizh guru-s* who taught *piccappāṭṭu*, *vaṇakkapāṭṭu*, *ammānapāṭṭu*, *caviṭṭu nāṭakaṁ* are called *aṇṇāvi-s*. Some of the famous masters in this field are *cinnatambi aṇṇāvi*, *vēdanāyakam aṇṇāvi*, *tommi aṇṇāvi*, *pāduva aṇṇāvi*, *dura svāmikal*, *maṇappaṭṭukāran antōnikkuṭṭi aṇṇāvi*, *paḷlipuṛam miṅku aṇṇāvi*, *paṇiḷḷa vīṭṭil pēṛaccan aṇṇāvi*, *koccikāran koccausepp aṇṇāvi*, *punnaiḷḷal pīlipōs aṇṇāvi*, *fabiyaṇ aṇṇāvi*, *ciṛayil āñcilōs aṇṇāvi*, *śauryār aṇṇāvi* and others.

3.1.2 Piṇṇappāṭṭu

Piṇṇappāṭṭu is a traditional song form practiced by the Aññūṭi community of Alappuzha district in Kerala. The term is believed to derive from earlier Buddhist and Jain *bhikṣu* traditions, in which monks sang while going door to door seeking alms. Later, as communities converted to Christianity, these musical practices were adapted to Christian devotional themes while retaining their older melodic and social character.

These songs have been preserved for nearly seven centuries and continue to carry traces of Dravidian musical structures, folk melodic patterns, and ritual performance traditions.

3.1.3 Puttanpāna

Puttanpāna, also known as *Rakṣākara Kīrtanam*, is a devotional composition written by Johann Ernst Hanxleden (Arnos Pathiri), likely between 1721 and 1732. Inspired by Pūntānaṁ's *Ñānappāna*, the work narrates the life of Jesus Christ, His suffering, death, resurrection, and the growth of the Church.

Widely recited during Holy Week, especially on Good Friday, *puttanpāna* consists of fourteen couplets. Each section addresses a major theological event—from creation and repentance to crucifixion and resurrection. The composition holds deep devotional value among Kerala Christians and continues to be sung collectively.

First couplet : God, human, creation - destruction

Second couplet : Human's repentance, christ's promise of salvation

Third couplet	: The immaculate conception of virgin Mary, who was free from original sin
Fourth couplet	: Angel's assurance to the doubting Joseph
Fifth couplet	: Birth of Jesus; His childhood
Sixth couplet	: His life, words and deeds
Seventh couplet	: The gospel verses
Eight couplet	: Miracles performed; transfiguration
Ninth couplet	: Raising Lazarus from death; Jesus's intimation to Mary about his death.
Tenth couplet	: Last supper, The night of the passion
Eleventh couplet	: Trial, judgement and crucifixion.
Twelfth couplet	: The sorrowful lamentation of Mary
Thirteenth couplet	: His resurrection and subsequent appearances
Fourteenth couplet	: Emergence and growth of church.

The fourteenth couplet is written under the title 'dēva mātāvinṭe vyākula prabandham' and the contents of puttanpāna are repeated in ślōka-s.

The rāga they sing is the standard westernised śaṅkarābharaṇam and without any tāla,

r g s , , , , ṇ s r , , ,
en ma ka nē nir ma la nē

r g m p , , , , g m r g , r , , , ,
nan ma yeṇ ṇuṁ ni rañ ñō nē

ṇ s r g m , , , , m g r s , ṇ , , ,
jan ma dō ṣa tiṇ ntē

ṇ s r , g r , , , , ṇ s , , , ,
bha ra mo zḥi cō pu trā

The *puttanpāna* was once used to sing the whole poem in houses after evening prayers. After a certain point of time, only ten to eleven couplets are added to

books and sung during the holy week and not in houses. The twelfth couplet is the famous one and pathos among all the couplets.

3.1.4 Ammānapāṭṭu

In *tamizh*, *kavi* means *pāṭṭu* (song). All those figurative elements that are used in *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu* can be seen in *ammānapāṭṭu* with the mandatorily different *rāga*-s. *ammāna* uses the *rāga temmāṇiku*, which emotes pathos. Both *puttanpāna* and *ammānapāṭṭu* employ the same *drāviḍa rāga*-s which were used in ancient *tamizh* music.

e.g. *centārtiruccu taṇṭan śīṣareyum tānkūṭṭi*
nnṭayiviḍai kēṭṭu māṇiḍarkkaypāḍupeḍa

This type of *tamizh* folk genre is widely famous among the southern Latin Christian keralites. *tēvamāta ammānai* and *āṇḍavar ammānai* are some of the *ammānapāṭṭu* compositions. The songs from *tēvamāta ammānai* are quite popular. The composers of these songs are unknown, although *vēdanāyakam piḷḷai* is one *ammānapāṭṭu* composer. The themes used here are the birth of Mary along with the new gospel.

e.g. *enne vaḷarttavale inamattā peṭṭavale*
kāṇṇayazhiyāmal karppōḍiruntavale

- *ammānam* part 5: *ślōka* 7,8

3.1.5 Paricamuṭṭukaḷi

Paricamuṭṭukaḷi is a performative martial folk art that adapts movements from traditional Kerala martial practices using swords and shields made of wood or metal. It is performed primarily during festive and auspicious Christian community occasions.

Training usually begins between the ages of 12 and 20 and continues over several months. Students first learn the songs and then the choreographed movement patterns. The *āśān* leads from the centre while students perform in circular formation. Rhythmic accompaniment is commonly provided by *jālra*, while movements involve coordinated striking of swords and shields along with footwork. The performers typically wear traditional Kerala warrior costume.

The form commemorates martyrs and heroic battles, while also preserving community identity through performance.

4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, *aṇṇāvipāṭṭu* and related coastal folk traditions represent a remarkable cultural synthesis where Christian devotion merges with Dravidian heritage and European artistic influence. From the meditative house-to-house singing of *piṇṇappāṭṭu* and the devotional poetry of *puttanpāna* to the rhythmic vitality of *paricamuṭṭukali*, these traditions preserve a layered history of music, ritual, literature, and performance.

These art forms do more than narrate religious themes; they stand as living evidence of cultural exchange, artistic adaptation, and the creative resilience of Kerala's coastal communities. Preserving them is essential not only for safeguarding heritage but also for understanding the broader musical and cultural history of South India.

4.1 Further Scope for Research

Several coastal folk traditions remain open for deeper scholarly study beyond those discussed here. These include *ślāmākarōḷi*, *dēvastāvīḷi*, *vāḷāṭṭa-paricavīśu kali*, *mārgamkali*, and *caviṭṭu nāṭakam*. Further interdisciplinary research involving folklore, musicology, performance studies, and cultural history would help preserve and document these valuable traditions more comprehensively.

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9. Coastal residents can showcase art forms

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yp4f5OKkGmg>

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