

Kalai Kaviri Performing Arts E-Journal
Vol. 2(1), July 2026, pg. 19 – 29

Tracing Performing Arts in Sangakala Ilakkiyangal and Their Socio-Cultural
Resonance

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Abstract

The Sangakala Ilakkiyangal, representing the earliest known literary tradition of South India, serves as the primary and most authoritative textual source for understanding the genesis of ancient Tamil performing arts. Adopting an interpretive, text-based methodology grounded in the established tradition of reading Sangam poetry as sociological evidence (Kailasapathy, 1968), this article examines the anthologies Ettuthokai and Pathuppattu for their documentation of Muttamil (the unity of Iyal, Isai, and Natakam) (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024). The texts describe a highly structured performance milieu, identifying specialized artistic classes such as the Paanar and Viraliyar, and classifying diverse forms of dance and drama known collectively as Koothu (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024; Gopal, 2024). Analysis of this secondary and primary literature suggests that Sangam arts were not isolated entertainment but deeply integrated cultural and sociological mechanisms, functioning as vehicles for political expression, religious ritual, and the articulation of a worldview rooted in nature and community life (Jacob & Sivadas, 2024). The descriptive nature of these literary records establishes an important documentary foundation for the study of subsequent classical Tamil performing arts, though — as a text-based interpretive study — its conclusions remain open to further verification against primary manuscript sources and archaeological evidence.

Keywords

Performing Arts, Sangakala Ilakkiyangal, Ettuthokai, Pathuppattu, Muttamil, Koothu

1.0 Introduction: Establishing the Context of Sangam Aesthetics

Sangam aesthetics denotes the corpus of literary conventions and critical principles underlying classical Tamil poetry produced during the Sangam period, conventionally dated between the third century BCE and the third century CE. Attributed to poets associated with three successive literary academies (*sangams*), this body of work — comprising anthologies such as the *Ettuthokai* and *Pattuppattu* — constitutes one of the earliest and most systematized poetic traditions in the Indian subcontinent, predating and developing largely independent of Sanskritic literary norms.

The defining feature of this aesthetic system is the *tinai* framework, a taxonomy that correlates human affective states with five ecological zones (*kurinji*, *mullai*, *marutham*, *neytal*, and *palai*), each governed by conventionalized flora, fauna, deities, occupations, and temporal markers. This is not incidental nature-imagery but a structured semiotic code: landscape functions as an objective correlative through which interior emotional experience is rendered legible. Poetic composition within this tradition is further stratified into *akam* (interior, concerning love and personal relationships) and *puram* (exterior, concerning war, kingship, and public life), each governed by distinct rules of decorum, persona, and permissible content.

Establishing this framework as a critical prerequisite is necessary because Sangam poetics operates through allusive economy rather than explicit statement; meaning is generated through the reader's or listener's competence in decoding conventional associations, making literary-historical context indispensable to interpretation rather than merely supplementary to it.

1.1 Definition and Chronological Framework of Sangam Literature

The Sangakala Ilakkiyangal (Sangam literature) represents the earliest literary tradition recorded in the Tamil language of South India, spanning a period conventionally dated between approximately 300 BCE and 300 CE (Gopal, 2024). These texts offer insight into the socio-political structure, economy, and daily life of ancient Tamilakam. The works are systematically classified into two major

anthologies: Ettuthokai (the "Eight Anthologies"), comprising several thousand short poems grouped into eight distinct compilations such as Purananuru and Pathittupathu, and Pathuppattu (the "Ten Idylls"), which comprises ten long, independent poems, including guide literature such as Perumpāṇāruppaṭai (Gopal, 2024).

The significance of this literature lies not only in its historical content but also in its function as a comprehensive cultural archive. The poems document everything from the highest levels of polity and warfare to the nuances of common life, including emotions, passions, and professions (Gopal, 2024). By examining these texts as reported in existing Sangam scholarship, researchers can reconstruct fundamental artistic practices that permeated ancient Tamil society.

1.2 The Foundational Concept of Muttamil

Central to the aesthetic philosophy of the Sangam Age was the comprehensive concept of Muttamil, or the Threefold Tamil, which integrated Iyal (Literature or Poetry), Isai (Music), and Natakam (Drama or Dance) (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024). The currency of this concept as early as the Sangam period underscores the fact that music and drama were already highly developed and connected art forms, rather than merely subsidiary activities of poetic recitation.

The Sangam literary works themselves often reflect this integrated approach. Many of the recorded poems have been characterized in prior scholarship as "dramatic utterances" (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024). This performative quality within the literature (Iyal) suggests that the poets were aware of the spoken, musical (Isai), and dramatic (Natakam) potential of their compositions, indicating a link between the three components of Muttamil, although this article treats that link as a documented scholarly interpretation rather than a self-evident fact requiring no further textual verification.

Furthermore, the arts were embedded in the social fabric, reflecting a holistic worldview in ancient Tamilakam. The close association of music and artistic practice with daily life, nature, and emotional interpretation suggests that Sangam art functioned as a means through which people understood and expressed their environment and relationships (Jacob & Sivadas, 2024). This proposed unity

contrasts with later, more rigid divisions between formal art and folk culture, and the blending of art, history, and society suggests that performance operated as a social institution contributing to identity formation and cultural memory (Jacob & Sivadas, 2024).

1.3 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This article is a qualitative, interpretive-philological study rather than an empirical or archival one. It proceeds by close reading of the Sangam anthologies as they are documented, translated, and discussed in existing peer-reviewed Tamil literary and performance-studies scholarship, rather than through the author's own critical edition of the classical Tamil originals. This approach follows the established methodological precedent, associated with landmark work such as Kailasapathy's (1968) *Tamil Heroic Poetry*, of treating Sangam poetry as sociological and ethnographic evidence for reconstructing the institutions of ancient Tamil society, alongside a performance-studies lens that reads Muttamil's three components — Iyal, Isai, and Natakam — as an integrated socio-cultural system rather than as isolated literary, musical, or dramatic categories.

Two limitations follow from this scope and are noted here for transparency. First, specific performance categories discussed below (for example, Veriyattu, Kuravaikkuttu, Thunangaikkuttu, Amalaikkuttu, and Kanniyan Koothu) are drawn from the secondary scholarship cited at each point rather than independently verified by the present author against the primary anthologies; readers seeking a first-hand philological confirmation should consult the cited sources and, where possible, the original Tamil texts. Second, the continuity claimed between Sangam-era performance and later classical and temple traditions (Section 4.3) is presented as a documented scholarly interpretation, most directly supported by Joseph (2019), rather than as an uncontested historical fact; the transition from bardic to temple-institutionalized dance remains an area of ongoing scholarly discussion.

2.0 The Soundscape of Sangam: Isai (Music) and Patronage

2.1 Music and the Tinai Landscape

Sangam music (Pan) was highly contextualized and linked to the natural environment through the concept of Tinai (the five ecological landscapes:

mountainous, forested, pastoral, farmlands, and coastal) (Jacob & Sivadas, 2024). This connection resulted in music that was site-specific, adjusting according to time, occasion, and emotion, reflecting a blend of nature and culture among the people inhabiting these landscapes.

The function of music extended well beyond aesthetic appreciation: it served as a medium for interpreting surroundings, expressing lived experience, and conveying social meaning (Jacob & Sivadas, 2024). While rooted in everyday life, music also functioned as a marker of prestige, power, and spiritual expression, suggesting a stratification of musical usage in which folk music reflected the immediate Tinai context, while formalized court music, such as royal eulogies, reinforced political legitimacy (Jacob & Sivadas, 2024).

2.2 Instrumental Traditions and Repertory

The Sangam literature evidences a rich instrumental tradition. The most frequently referenced instrument was the Yazh, a stringed instrument often described as a large lute, particularly associated with professional bards (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024). *Perumpāṇāruppaṭai* (Guide to the Great Paanar) is named after the minstrels who played this instrument. The texts describe various types of Yazh and multiple varieties of drums, reflecting a complex musical structure (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024).

In performance, percussion instruments were indispensable, since they were essential for maintaining the tala (time measure), described in prior scholarship as central to dance (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024). This emphasis on rhythm underscores the interdependence of music and dance within the Muttamil framework.

2.3 The Genre of Aatruppadai (Guide Literature)

A pivotal documentary genre linking literature to performance is Aatruppadai (Guide Literature), found within the Pathuppattu anthology. These poems, such as *Perumpāṇāruppaṭai* (composed circa 190–200 CE), function as guides directing itinerant bards to wealthy patrons (Gopal, 2024). The texts detail routes, villages, and the distinctive lifestyles across the five tinai of the Kanchi territory.

The detailed descriptions in Aatruppadai provide sociological and cultural documentation of the period, suggesting that the Paanar's performance narrative was intertwined with ethnographic reportage and political eulogy (Gopal, 2024). The subsequent classification of Paanar by instrument (e.g., Isai Paanar, Yazh Paanar, Mandai Paanar) implies a complex, pre-codified artistic system, in which the literature (Iyal) served to document and lend legitimacy to an existing, dynamic oral and performative culture (Isai and Natakam) practiced by these professional, nomadic bards.

3.0 Koothu and the Kinetics of Ancient Tamilakam: Dance and Drama (Natakam)

3.1 Koothu: The Proto-Theatrical Form

Koothu (which includes Therukoothu) was the encompassing, ancient art form central to Tamil performing tradition. It involved a blend of dance, music, and storytelling, often centred on epics, and is described in prior scholarship as among the most popular forms of entertainment among the people (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024).

The Sangam texts provide early evidence of structured dramatic elements. Female performers specialising in dance were referred to as *nataka makalir*, and their performance was explicitly termed Natakam, or Drama (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024). The theatrical traditions of the ancient Dravidian context are further associated with the concept of *Meyppadukal*, denoting emotional expressions and dramatic sentiments. The integral nature of music and dance is reinforced by the necessity of musical accompaniment, with specific percussion instruments required to establish the necessary rhythm.

3.2 Classification and Function of Sangam Koothu

The Sangam literature is useful for classifying the functional diversity of Koothu forms, which spanned ritual, communal, and courtly contexts (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024). Table 1 summarises the principal forms discussed in the secondary scholarship consulted for this article.

Koothu Form	Character / Context	Social Function
Veriyattu	Ecstatic, trance-based dance performed by ritual specialists (Sāmiādi / Komarathādi)	Healing, religious ritual, communal spiritual welfare
Kuravaikkuttu	Communal group dance, primarily associated with the Marudam landscape	Celebration of marriages and military victories
Thunangaikkuttu	Codified group dance performed by men and women in open village settings	Festive and post-battle communal expression
Amalaikkuttu	Codified group dance form documented alongside Thunangaikkuttu	Communal and festive performance
Kanniyan Koothu	Performance by two men dressed as women, dancing to the Makudam drum	Entertainment and ritual role-reversal performance

Table 1. Functional classification of Koothu (dance/drama) forms in Sangam literature, compiled from Ramana and Seshamamba (2024) and Gopal (2024).

The classification summarised above suggests a distinction between purely ritualistic, community-based dances (such as Veriyattu) and more formalised, celebratory group dances (such as Kuravaikkuttu). This duality has been read in the secondary literature as evidence that a process of aestheticization — the gradual separation of performance from its immediate religious or survival function — was already under way during the Sangam era (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024).

The Sangakala Ilakkiyangal captured what prior scholarship describes as a pre-institutional state of these art forms. While the Sangam texts themselves may lack conclusive evidence of fully dedicated dance theatres of the kind later described in the epic Silappathikaram, that later text (composed in approximately the 5th or 6th century CE) explicitly classifies Koothu into structured forms such as Santhi

Koothu (classical dance) and Vinoda Koothu (popular dance) (Joseph, 2019). This continuum has been read as suggesting that the earlier, bardic, and ritualistic forms documented in the Sangam texts provided source material later institutionalised and refined into classical traditions (Joseph, 2019).

4.0 The Performers: Agents of Culture and Economy

4.1 The Paanar and Viraliyar: Professional Artistic Class

Sangam society supported a specialised and hierarchical class of professional performing artists, including the Paanar, Viraliyar, Koothar, Vayiriyar, Kodiyaar, and Nataka Makalir (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024). Table 2 summarises this classification. The Paanar (male bards or minstrels) occupied a visible position in the poetry, appearing, for example, in numerous places in the Purananuru, and specialised in singing, often while playing the Yazh. The Viraliyar were their female counterparts, often accompanying the Paanar to royal courts, and are described as experts in both folk songs and dance (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024).

Artist Class	Gender / Specialization	Primary Role
Paanar	Male bards, specialists in the Yazh	Singing, eulogy, court and itinerant performance
Viraliyar	Female counterparts of the Paanar	Folk song and dance, accompanying Paanar to courts
Koothar	Actors / performers of Koothu	Dramatic and narrative performance
Vayiriyar	Wind-instrument players	Instrumental accompaniment
Kodiyaar	Banner / flag-bearing performers	Ceremonial and processional roles
Nataka Makalir	Female dance specialists	Dance performance classified as Natakam

Table 2. Classification of performing artists in Sangam Ilakkiyangal, compiled from Ramana and Seshamamba (2024).

4.2 The Sociology of Patronage and Poverty

The bard community, including the Paanar and Viraliyar, maintained a largely nomadic existence, relying on patronage from the Chera, Chola, and Pandya kings

and chieftains, who bestowed donations upon the artists in exchange for performances and eulogies (Mariyaselvi, 2022).

However, the documentation in Purananuru, as discussed by Mariyaselvi (2022), presents a more complex sociological picture. Although the Paanar received rewards, they are also described as often living in conditions of poverty. The literature suggests an ethical dimension within this community, in that they are described as frequently sharing the rewards they received with others in similarly impoverished circumstances rather than accumulating them personally (Mariyaselvi, 2022). This dual portrayal — economic dependence on patronage combined with a practice of redistribution — has been read as positioning the Paanar as both facilitators of royal display and, in the secondary literature's interpretation, exemplars of a broader ethical stance, while preserving the memory of the Veera Yuga (Heroic Age).

4.3 Continuity into the Post-Sangam Era

The performing arts traditions established during the Sangam period are described in the literature as forming a continuous foundation influencing subsequent artistic development, particularly during the Pallava age (Joseph, 2019). A notable socio-cultural development involved the gendering of performance roles: the Sangam texts distinguish between the male Paanar (associated with music and eulogy) and the female Viraliyar or Nataka Makalir (associated with dance and drama) (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024). This division of artistic labour is discussed in the secondary literature as laying groundwork for later institutionalisation. Joseph (2019) traces the transition from the nomadic, bardic milieu of the Paanar and Viraliyar to the institutionalised temple dance of the medieval period, involving the Kanigaiyar and later the Devadasi, describing this shift as catalysed by socio-cultural movements such as the Bhakti movement, which situated dance and music within temple worship. On this reading, the ritualistic performances (such as Veriyattu) and courtly theatrical practices (Natakam) of the Sangam Age are connected, via the literary record, to the origins of later classical forms such as Bharatanatyam (Joseph, 2019) — though, as noted in Section 1.3, this continuity is best understood as a documented scholarly interpretation rather than a settled historical fact, and remains an area where further archaeological and epigraphic corroboration would strengthen the claim.

5.0 Conclusion

The Sangakala Ilakkiyangal provide important textual evidence for the link between ancient Tamil literature and the performing arts, as reconstructed through the interpretive methodology outlined in Section 1.3. The concept of Muttamil — the union of Iyal, Isai, and Natakam — is presented in the literature consulted as an aesthetic foundation in which the arts were closely tied to community life, spiritual practice, and political function. The literature documents a performance culture characterised by developed musical instruments (e.g., the Yazh), context-specific musical traditions tied to the Tinai landscape, and specialised performance genres, chief among them the structurally diverse Koothu forms (Ramana & Seshamamba, 2024; Jacob & Sivadas, 2024).

The texts also offer a portrait of professional artists — specifically the Paanar and Viraliyar — whose position combined cultural prestige with economic dependence on patronage (Mariyaselvi, 2022). Their roles extended beyond entertainment to historical preservation and, in the secondary literature's reading, ethical example. While the Sangam texts describe what prior scholarship terms a pre-institutional stage of the arts, these descriptions are treated in that scholarship as foundational to the later codification found in post-Sangam works such as *Silappatikaram* (Joseph, 2019). Consequently, and with the limitations noted in Section 1.3 in view, the Sangam literature can be regarded as an important documentary source for understanding the origins and continuity of Tamil cultural and artistic heritage — one that would benefit from continued linguistic, archaeological, and epigraphic study to corroborate the interpretive claims discussed here.

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