

## Cultural terms of Mullukkurumba Tribes of the Nilgiris District

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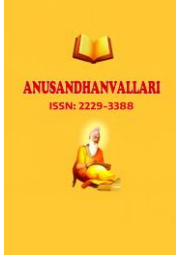
### Abstract

This study investigates the role of explores the intricate network of traditional beliefs, linguistic expressions, and socio-cultural practices that define the Mullukkurumba community, one of the indigenous tribal groups inhabiting the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu. Belonging to the larger Kurumba cluster, the Mullukkurumbas have retained a unique cultural identity deeply connected with nature, land, and ancestral traditions. Their dialect, derived from Dravidian linguistic roots, reflects influences from Kannada, Tamil, and Malayalam, forming an essential medium through which cultural and ecological knowledge is transmitted across generations. The research investigates how cultural terms within the Mullukkurumba language embody their worldviews, oral narratives, and ritual practices. These terms often encapsulate their environmental ethics, kinship relations, and spiritual cosmology, emphasizing a strong bond between human existence and the natural environment. Socially, the Mullukkurumba community is organized into four major clans or kulams -Villappa, Kathika, Vadakku, and Vengada - which govern marriage alliances and social interactions, reflecting their exogamous kinship system. Cultural expressions such as folklore, songs, and material crafts play a vital role in preserving their intangible heritage. Traditional occupations like hunting, gathering, basket weaving, and shifting cultivation embody practical ecological wisdom and form a linguistic repository of specialized terminology related to flora, fauna, and seasonal cycles. In recent decades, modernization and ecological restrictions have challenged the continuity of these cultural practices. Despite welfare initiatives promoting language and art preservation, the younger generation's shifting livelihoods have resulted in diminishing use of indigenous terms tied to traditional life. The study concludes that preserving these terms; researchers can illuminate the tribe's cognitive and ecological philosophy, providing valuable insights into how language, culture, and environment interconnect in Indigenous world views.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Knowledge, Religious, Traditional life, Hunting, Cultural lexicon

### Introduction

The tribal population is found in almost all parts of the World. India is one of the two largest concentrations of tribal population. The tribal community constitutes an important part of Indian social structure. Tribes are earliest communities as they are the first settlers. The tribals are said to be the original inhabitants of this land. These groups are still in primitive stage and often referred to as primitive's Adivaasis, aborigines, or Girijans and so on. The tribal population in India, according to the 2011 census, was 6.7%. At present India has the second largest tribal population in the world, next to Africa the term 'tribes' in the Indian context today are referred as 'Scheduled Tribes'. The scheduled tribes constitute the second largest group of the backward classes that come under the unprivileged section of the populace. These communities are regarded as the earliest among the present inhabitants of India. And it is considered that they have survived here with their unchanging ways of life for centuries. Many of the tribal groups are still in a primitive stage and far from the impact of modern civilization.



The term scheduled tribe has become explained variously. To the ordinary people the word suggests aborigines who live in hills and forests, to administrators it means a group of citizens those who have some privileges supported by constitution, to an anthropologist it indicates a special field for study of a social phenomenon, Risly V. Elwin and other used the word 'aboriginals' to refer tribals. Sir Bains, a British Census Officer called the tribal community 'the hill tribes. Hutton preferred to use the term 'primitive tribes' Mahatma Gandhi popularized the word 'Girijans' the constitution of India has accepted to use the term 'Scheduled Tribes', which was introduced for the first time by Simon Commission in 1928. Tribes are also known as 'Vanavasis', 'Aranyavasis', Vanavasis' etc. But the term tribe is nowhere defined in the Constitution. Article 366 (25) of the Constitution says that Scheduled Tribes are tribes or tribal communities or parts of groups within such tribes or tribal communities which the Indian President may specify by public notification under Article 342(1).

### **Tribes**

Tribes are designated in different names in Tamil. They are Tholkudikal, Muthukudikal, Poorvaika kudikal. However, all these terms mean one and the same meaning. The tribal people, with their indigenous identity live in isolation in different parts of Tamil Nadu. Each tribal group has its own unique language and culture. Generally, they are separated from market economy and live in goods earning economy, without any economic inequality. They live in equilibrium society. The aboriginal tribes are really civilized people in Indian context. While comparing with other societies of India, it is observed that tribes are mingled with nature and they lead a life without any inequality among the fellow beings of the society. In India, around 600 tribal communities live. In Tamil Nadu 37 tribal communities have been recognized by the government.

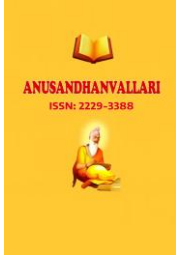
### **The tribes inhabiting the Nilgiris**



There are ten different types of Tribal Communities living in the Nilgiris district. They are as follows, Toda, Kota, Irula, Kattunayakka, Paniya, Alukurumba, Pettakurumba, Mullukurumba, Kasaba, Soliga. But a majority community which lives in the Nilgiris is Baduga. They are not tribes. They are backward community. In the Nilgiris, 47.9% percentage of people is Tamil, 15.95% of people are Malayalis 6.85% of people are Kannadigas, 0.24% of people are Badugas. The Nilgiris is a multilingual area, and almost all languages of this area have been linguistically studied by scholars from the discipline of Linguistics.

### **Mullukkurumba**

Mullukkurumbas were isolated from the mainland and fully dependent on the forest. They are living as small mobile group inside the forest. Due to their savage state, they were the least civilized community among the tribal community, and they were very arrogant and mischievous. The researchers believe that the name "Kurumba" derived from the Tamil word "Kurumbu" which means mischief. Kurumbas has distinctive culture,



language and rituals. They strictly follow endogamy and monogamy to regulate their marriage systems and Polyandry is considered as sin.

### Origin and appearance

There is no authentic written record available to trace the origin of the Mullukkurumbas. But there are many folk tales and songs narrating ethnic history. They claim themselves as veetuvvar i.e, hunting tribes of waynad area. Since the Mullukkurumbas are good at hunting with their bows and arrows even now, they have the belief that their ancestors were created by Lord siva specially for hunting. Thurston [1975], quoting the Madras census Report 1891 states that “the kurumbas or kurubas are the modern representatives of the ancient Kurumbas or pallavas, who were once so powerful throughout southern India, but very little trace of their greatness now remains. In the seventh century, the power of the pallavas king seems to have been at its zenith; but, shortly after this, the kongu, chola, and chaaulukya chiefs succeed in winning several victories over them. The final overthrow of the kurumba seveignity was effected by the chola king Adondal about the seventh or eighth century A.D, and the hills, and in the Nilgiris and the wayanaad in coorg and Mysore, representatives of this ancient race are now found as wild and uncivilized tribes”.

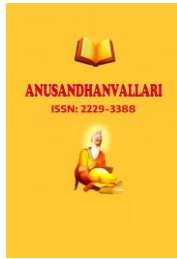
### Mullukkurumba Settlements



The Mullukkurumbas, a subgroup of Kurumbas is found in the Wayanad district of Kerala, and the adjacent Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu. Gudalur taluk of Nilgiri district has ten Mullukkurumba settlements- Kappaala, Devala, Netunkootu, Nerivalappu, Oonimuula, Kaappukkunnu, Paticceri, Kalliccaalu, Maatakkunnu, Konnaatu and Teyiyakunni. Betta Kurumba, KattuNaicka and Paniya tribes also inhabit these areas. It is estimated that the Mullukkurumba population of Wayanad district is more than that of Nilgiris. According to Mullukkurumbas, they are Veetuvvar (hunters) and Mullukkurumba is a name created by Nairs of Wayanad. Mullu means ‘thorn’ and according to legends the name was given by the king of Kottayam, according to whom, they were troublesome, like thorns.

### Culture

Culture has defined culture as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’. Culture is shared: culture is the sociological sense, is something shared. Culture is transmitted not through genes but by means of language. Culture is continuous and cumulative: culture exists as a continuous process. In its historical growth it tends to become cumulative. Culture is s ‘growing whole’, which includes the achievements of the past and the present and makes provision for the future achievements of mankind.



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## **Culture and society**

Culture is a unique possession of man. It is one of the distinguishing traits of human society. Culture does not exist at the sub-human level. Only man is born and brought up in a cultural environment. Other animals live in a natural environment. Every man is born into a society is the same as saying that every man is born into a culture. The dictum 'man is a social being' can thus be redefined as 'man is a cultural being'. Every man can be regarded as a representative of his culture. Culture is the unique quality of man which separates him from the lower animals.

Culture is very broad term that includes all our walks of life, our modes of behavior, our philosophies and ethics, our morals and manners, our customs and traditions, our religious, political, economic and other types of activities. Culture includes all that man has acquired in his individual and social life. In the words of MacIver and Page, culture is "the realm of styles, of values, of emotional attachments, of intellectual adventures". It is the entire 'social heritage' which the individual receives from the group.

## **Community Livelihood**

Though traditionally, the Mullukkurumba were engaged in shifting cultivation, their current practice is settled agriculture. There are a few rice varieties cultivated by the Mullukkurumba such as Gandhagashala, Jeerakashala, Chomala, Njanduveliyan, and Chettuveliyan. The traditional foods of the Mullukkurumba community are rich and they are cooked particularly during festivals and rituals. Variety of foods is cooked that are related to life cycle rituals such as pregnancy, childbirth, puberty, marriage and death.

## **Hunting: Tradition and Constraint**

Historically, the Mullukkurumba were expert hunters of various animals and birds, activities they would pursue in their leisure time. While hunting held a specific ritual role, it is currently prohibited due to modern forest and legal regulations. They employed several traditional weapons for hunting, including the Villu (bow), Ambu (arrow), Mottamb (a type of arrow for birds and rabbits), and Kathiyamb (a type of arrow for larger animals). The crafting of their arrows is a careful, time-intensive process. Bamboo for the arrows is cut only on specific lunar days. The wood is then stored in a smoke-filled room for six months before the arrow is constructed. Because the arrows were used sparingly - only on auspicious or celebratory occasions - their durability is remarkable, often lasting around sixty years.

## **The Rituals of the Hunt and Meat Distribution**

In a traditional hunt, a group of men would surround a forest area and attempt to hunt any animals found within. The resulting meat had a specific, ceremonial distribution system: The first person to strike the pig with an arrow earned the right to the head and a kaal kurak (thigh), recognizing that they had secured the most crucial portion. The second person to hit the pig could choose and cut any other part they wished. Following the hunt, the hunting team performs specific ceremonies. The pig's liver, highly prized and called ponnerachi (golden meat), is cooked along with other internal organs over a fire at the spot of the hunt. The very first

offering is always given to the forest deity, after which the meat is shared among all hunters. Before cooking, the number of people is carefully counted to ensure that the meat is divided equally, even if it comes down to sharing a single piece among everyone present.

### Dheivapera and the Place of Worship



The Mullukkurumbas are residents of Pandalur taluk of the Nilgiris, and their settlements are concentrated in a radius of 25 km on the border of Wayanad region of Kerala. These settlements are ethnically and territorially divided into administrative units - traditionally 4 in number. These are Kallunadu, Karanadu, Neriyanadu and Paekkanadu. The houses are arranged in a planned manner with the center devoted to a temple house called koilveedu. Houses are rectangular in layout and have 1 room and have a verandah running on all 4 sides. Doors of some houses are made of solid timber with fine carving.



The Dheivapera and Madhpera are the traditional and sacred places of worship for the Mullukkurumba community, holding deep significance in their community life. The construction of the Dheivapera relies on natural materials, including bamboo, mud, kachi pillu (straw), and thereuvepillu (a specific type of grass). The walls of the Dheivapera are notably decorated using natural colors.

### The Puthari Harvest Celebration and Thengapodi Sweet dish



The harvest festival of the community is known as thulam pathu or puthari. The festival has rituals performed during paddy harvest. The ceremony takes place on the tenth day of the Malayalam month of thulam and is intended to ensure a prosperous harvest for the following year. In the morning of thulam pathu, a group of young boys will collect rice panicles, mango leaves, leaves of a banyan tree, and leaves of bamboo from the fields in order to offer in the temple. The panicles are dipped in river water and offered to the community god. In the temple, the coconut is broken and the coconut water is sprinkled over the rice panicles as an act of purification. The rice panicles and the three types of leaves are then taken to the dheivappera, the place of worship. Rice, "sambar", fried vegetables, pickles and papad are prepared during the thulam pathu, to cater to the feast. During thulam pathu, while making rice freshly harvested grain is added to the cooked rice. This is the speciality of puthari.

One of the most important food items prepared during the puthari is called thengapodi. The coconut which was broken in the temple for the ceremony will be grated and to the grated coconut, jaggery and sugar are mixed to prepare the sweet dish called thengapodi. Thengapodi is one of the items served during the feast.



### Traditional Fishing and Rituals

The Mullukkurumba are masters of fishing. Meen koral is a traditional fishing technique of the Mullukkurumba. Malamatti meen koral is one of the most important rituals associated with Mullukkurumba marriages. A traditional fishing implement known as kortha is used to easily catch fish from shallow water. Traditional fishing has been practiced using the meen kootta and kortha. Kootta is tied around the neck to put in the fish that is caught with the kortha.

### Malamatti Meen Koral - A Marriage Ceremony



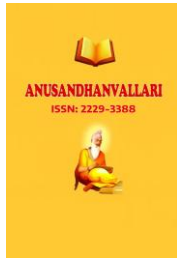
Associated with a ceremony for the new bride, the bride is asked to catch fish with the kortha, the traditional fishing tool. The new bride would carry a new wicker basket tied around her neck. Once the day for the occasion of the special ceremony is announced the senior ladies would come with their baskets to catch fish along with the bride. The bride will offer betel leaves and betel nuts to the elderly ladies and they, in turn, offer a fish caught by them to the new bride. The ritual of the new bride thus catching fish is called malamatti meen koral.

Another interesting observation is the way the Mullukkurumba catch crabs from the ridges of nearby paddy fields and riverbanks. Hands are used to catch the crabs after digging a pit with a crowbar. Crab species including karinjand and paal njand are included in the diet. Crab is cleaned and washed beside the river itself, and in addition to turmeric, salt and pepper powder, small, but extremely spicy kanthari mulaku (bird's eye chillies) are added to the crab. The mix is boiled until it is cooked well.

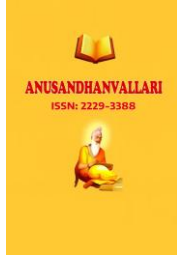
### Cultural terms

A Cultural term is a word, phrase, or concept that is deeply rooted in and specific to the way of life, traditions, beliefs, customs, or values of a particular society, community, or ethnic group. In essence, these are the words that carry a meaning that goes beyond a simple dictionary definition; they are loaded with social, historical, or ritual significance within that culture.

S.No	Cultural Term	Literal / Simple Translation	Cultural Significance
	Puthari	Puthu (New) + Ari (Rice)	The ceremonial new rice harvest festival, marking the end of the agricultural cycle and a time for



			rituals, thanks, and family gatherings.
	Thengapodi	Coconut Powder	A specific sweet mixture prepared as a devotional offering or traditional food during a festival like Puthari.
	Sari/Saree	Piece of Cloth	A long piece of cloth, but culturally signifies traditional Indian attire for women, with specific draping styles tied to region and occasion.
	Meen koral	Meen (Fish) + Koral (Technique/Method)	The traditional fishing technique used by the Mullukkurumba community.
	Kortha	Implement	A specific type of traditional fishing implement is designed to easily catch fish from shallow water.
	Kootta	Basket/Container	A traditional wicker basket tied around the neck, specifically used to hold the fish caught with the kortha.
	Kanthari mulaku	Chilli Pepper	Bird's eye chilies - a specific, extremely spicy ingredient essential for preparing the traditional crab dish.
	Karinjand and Paal njand	Types of Crab	Specific local crab species that are a part of the Mullukkurumba diet.
	Malamatti Meen Koral	Marriage Fish Catching	The entire marriage ceremony/ritual where the new bride catches fish with the kortha alongside the senior ladies. It symbolizes her integration into the community and her role in contributing to the household.
	Betel leaves and betel nuts	Ingredients	Items that the new bride offers as a gesture of respect to the elderly ladies during the Malamatti Meen Koral ritual.
	Amme	Mother	A distinct and highly localized term for mother, differing from common regional terms, indicating the specific tribal language of the Mullukkurumba.
	Appen	Father	A distinct and highly localized term for father.
	Kurumatti	Wife	A term specific to the Mullukkurumba tribe, likely an in-group term or title for the wife, possibly derived from the tribe's name, 'Kuruma'.



	Kuṛumen	Husband	A Mullukkurumba tribe-specific term for husband, parallel to Kuṛumāṭṭi. (Note: This is an alternate term to Kurumaan, showing variation in usage or dialect).
	Keni	Well	The Keni is a unique type of traditional well used by the Mullukkurumba community for drawing water.

### Conclusion

The study on the cultural terms of the Mullukkurumba tribes of the Nilgiris district highlights the deep interconnection between language and traditional life. The tribe's lexicon reflects not only their socio-cultural practices but also their ecological consciousness and community values. Each term embodies knowledge systems rooted in the tribe's collective experience, emphasizing social organization, kinship, rituals, and livelihood patterns. Through these cultural terms, the Mullukkurumba people transmit their heritage, maintain identity, and sustain intergenerational continuity. The analysis reveals how linguistic expressions serve as a repository of indigenous wisdom, mirroring worldview, belief systems, and modes of interaction with nature. Documenting and understanding these terms are therefore crucial for preserving linguistic diversity and cultural identity. Overall, this research reaffirms that language is not merely a communication tool but a living archive of the Mullukkurumba tribe's cultural and intellectual heritage.

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