

# Paniya Riddles

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## INTRODUCTION

The Paniyas form a comparatively large aboriginal community of (paddy) cultivators and agricultural laborers who inhabit the Wynad plateau of Kerala, India,<sup>1</sup> and the adjoining Nilgiris District of Tamilnadu.<sup>2</sup> Their traditional occupation was and, in some remote areas, still is food-gathering, hunting, fishing, and shifting cultivation. For centuries, however, the majority of them have been employed or rather, exploited as agricultural laborers by the landholding classes which, until recently, have even kept them as bonded laborers; hence originates the tribal designation, Paniya, meaning "laborer."

The Paniyas are included among those ethnic groups of South India on whom a thorough ethnographic study is still a desideratum. For the present, we have to rely upon the useful but too brief monograph by Kurup/Roy Burman (1966) who, on page 45, also give a list of previous publications on the tribe. Having in view this rather scanty material on the Paniyas, it is small wonder that, so far, not a single specimen of their folklore has become known to us. It is the aim of this contribution to give a glimpse of their folklore by presenting a selection of riddles which I had the opportunity to collect in the course of linguistic field research among the Paniyas (and Bëttu Kurumbas) of the Nilgiris District, Tamilnadu, from December, 1981, to May, 1982.<sup>3</sup>

The forty-four riddles that are presented here were communicated to me by my then main informant, Velli (Vulli) (\*1959), son of Pālan, from Allūr Vayal near Thorapalli, Gudalur Taluk, Nilgiris District, in March, 1982.<sup>4</sup>

Asking riddles is very much in vogue among the Paniyas; it is not

confined to a certain age-group, but is invariably enjoyed by young and old. The riddle may indeed be regarded as the favorite form of the oral literature of the Paṇiyas, probably because asking riddles does not necessarily require a special occasion or leisure time (as songs or tales do), but can be enjoyed at any hour of the day. And as every day, from dawn to dusk, is marked by hard work, leisure time which seems so indispensable for the survival of a community's oral traditions, is nearly unknown to the Paṇiyas.

As regards the arrangement of this collection of riddles, I have decided for a classification according to answers under the topics "god" (no. 1), "man" (nos. 2-12), "animals" (nos. 13-22), "plants" (nos. 23-31), and "things" (nos. 32-44). Although I am aware of the fact that the classification offered by Taylor in his monumental work *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Taylor 1951) does more justice to the riddle, I have given preference to the above-mentioned arrangement for mainly two reasons. Firstly, in my view, a collection of forty-four riddles is too small a corpus to justify a classificatory arrangement which goes so deep into details as that adapted by Taylor for English riddles. Secondly, for a reader who is chiefly interested in riddles as representing examples of the wit, humor, and poetic imagination, in short, of the creative verbal art of a community, the system employed here is more lucid and thus serves its purpose in a better way.

Nevertheless, I shall subjoin in the following a classification of the Paṇiya riddles according to Taylor (1951)—at least in the form of a brief synopsis which regards only the main subdivisions (with some slight modifications) and disregard details. In Taylor's collection the answers are left out of account "except for subsidiary purposes." Here, the "fundamental conception underlying the enigmatical comparison determines the place of the riddles. The main subdivisions or chapters in this collection are descriptions of (1) something living, (2) an animal, (3) several animals, (4) a person, (5) several persons, (6) a plant, (7) a thing. In these varieties of the true riddle an object is equated to something entirely different from itself, and this latter thing forms the basis of the classification" (Taylor 1951: 3-4).

#### CLASSIFICATORY SYNOPSIS OF THE RIDDLES

1. Comparisons to a living creature
  1. 1. Comparison of a person to a living creature: no. 2 (man);
  1. 2. Comparison of a thing to a living creature: no. 33 (door).
2. Comparisons to an animal / animals
  2. 1. Comparison of a living creature to an animal: no. 15 (monkey);

2. 2. Comparison of an animal to animals and things: no. 16 (dog to glow-worms, pandal posts and walking-stick);
2. 3. Comparison of a plant to an animal: no. 26 (jack-fruit to deer);
2. 4. Comparisons of a thing / things to an animal / animals: nos. 11a (hand to monkey), 36a (pestles to snakes), 37a (boiling gruel to bull), 38 (sandals to horse), 40 (oboe to cock), 42a (bellows to dead deer).
  
3. Comparisons to a person / persons
  3. 1. Comparisons of an animal / animals to a person / persons: nos. 14 (elephant to “ little man ”), 17 (dog to “ little man ”), 18 (bat to “ little man ”), 19 (tortoise to man), 20 (crab to “ little man ”), 21 (fish to “ little man ”), 22 (leeches to “ all the children of one father ”);
  3. 2. Comparisons of a person to a person: nos. 3a (carpenter to weaver), 4 (man with four eyes to man with spectacles);
  3. 3. Comparison of a supernatural being to a person: no. 1 (god to person);
  3. 4. Comparisons of a plant / plants to a person / persons: nos. 23 (coconut to man), 25 (coconut tree to man), 27 (bananas to children), 28 (coffeetree and berries to man and children), 31 (leaves of the banyan tree to “ all the children of one father ”);
  3. 5. Comparisons of a thing / things to a person / persons: nos. 8 (fingers and tongue to six people), 9 (fingers and toes to twenty people), 12 (penis to “ little man ”), 34 (lock and key to persons [I and you, a “ little man ”]), 35 (grinding stone to “ little man ”), 37b (ladle to sooty baldhead), 39 (walking stick to “ little man ”).
  
4. Comparisons to a plant
  4. 1. Comparisons of a plant to a plant: nos. 24 (fruit to coconut), 29 (fruit to bitter-gourd), 30 (creeper to *ci:ne* creeper);
  4. 2. Comparison of a thing to plants: no. 42b (glowing iron to ripening (bananas)).
  
5. Comparisons to a thing / things
  5. 1. Comparison of an animal to several things: no. 13 (elephant to small basket, big basket, four mortars, pestle, stick, two cigarettes);
  5. 2. Comparisons of a thing / things to a thing / things: nos. 3b (plank to cloth), 5 (small sticks to eyelashes), 6 (two houses with one post to nose), 7 (quartzstones to teeth), 10 (fingernail to man’s head), 11b (treestump to drum), 32 (garden to cattle corral), 36b (anthill to mortar), 41 (single grain of paddy and chaff to match and light), 43 (food to lime), 44 (tree to water [course]).

The survey shows that, in Paniya riddling, there seems to be a tendency to give preference to comparisons

- of a thing / things to a thing / things (5. 2.),
- of an animal / animals to a person / persons (3. 1.),
- of a thing / things to a person / persons (3. 5.),
- of a thing / things to an animal / animals (2. 4.), and
- of a plant / plants to a person / persons (3. 4.).

Most of the riddles could be classified under these five (out of fifteen) comparison groups.

One peculiarity with regard to the comparisons employed in the riddles deserves particular mention; it is the repeated occurrence of the formulaic expression "a little man" which serves as a metaphor for animals (nos. 14, 17, 18, 20, 21, and 34b) and things (nos. 12, 35, and 39) as well, in riddles that are grouped under "3. Comparisons to a person / persons." Another such formulaic expression occurring, however, only twice is obviously represented by the phrase "all the children of one father" which is used as a metaphor for animals (no. 22) and plants (no. 31). The two formulas may be regarded as characteristic features of Paniya riddling.

In notes subjoined to several of the riddles, I have offered explanations whenever I felt it needed; particularly in cases where a reader who is not (very well) acquainted with the Indian context might find difficulties in grasping the metaphoric substitution or metonymic transformation. Here and there, I have, moreover, presented some comparative material. The sources drawn upon for comparison are Taylor (1951) and extant collections of riddles from other tribal communities living in the same area, *viz.*, the Nilgiri Hills.<sup>5</sup> So, in cases for which I could trace a riddle in Taylor (1951), the pertinent classification number(s) and headnote(s) as set down in his classificatory work have been given. However, parallels and related riddles which have been found to be contained in the collections of riddles from other Nilgiri tribes, have been quoted in full for facilitating comparisons.

#### THE RIDDLES

##### *God* (no. 1)

1. If we want to see a country, we cannot see it in its entirety, even if we save and spend money and travel about. But there is one person: he sees all the countries.—God.

##### *Man* (nos. 2–12)

2. It crawls and gropes about on four legs; when it has finished

crawling, [it walks] on two legs.—Man.

Cp. Taylor 1951: nos. 46–47: The Riddle of the Sphinx.

3. A carpenter planed a plank which had to be planed; but it has neither a back (bottom side) nor a belly (top side).—The weaver and the cloth.  
(Either side of a piece of woven cloth looks alike. So, it is impossible to say which is the “back side” and which is the “top side.”)
4. A man has four eyes.—A man with spectacles.
5. Small sticks beat against this bank and against that bank.—The eyelashes.  
Cp. Taylor 1951: no. 1044: Trees around a well.
6. For two houses, there is only one post.—The nose (i.e., the two nostrils separated by the nasal septum).  
Cp. Taylor 1951: no. 1143 (nostrils as doors or rooms).—Mele-nāḍu Irula: Zvelebil 1979: 363, no. 8=Zvelebil 1982: 350, no. 8: One single central beam for two houses.—Pālu Kurumba: Kapp 1978: 514, no. 2: There is only one pillar for two houses.—Ālu Kurumba: Kapp 1984: 303, no. 3: There is one post for two houses.
7. In a pond, there are many quartz-stones.—The teeth.  
Cp. Taylor 1951: no. 1150: Red Cave That Is Always Wet. § 3: Stones.
8. Five people went on a path; having gone there, they took up a small load and came back. Then one (another) man seized and lowered that load.—The fingers (of the right hand) and the tongue.  
Cp. Taylor 1951: no. 980–982: Two See It; Five (Ten) Pick It.—Toda: Emeneau 1984: 407, no. 8a: Six men go one one path. Five push one over a cliff and return; No. 8b: Five men throw one man over a cliff and return.—Ālu Kurumba: Kapp 1984: 303, no. 1: A man walks on a path. A fruit lay there. It is two people who saw it. It is ten people who picked it up. It is thirty-two people who ate it up; No. 5: A single person carries away a load which five people bring along.
9. Twenty people go on one path. From among them, only five people take and eat something jointly. Fifteen people neither take nor eat anything.—The fingers and the toes.  
Cp. sub riddle no. 8.
10. If you cut off a man’s head, he will die. If you cut off another man’s head, he will not die: Another head will grow from the spot where the head has been cut off.—The fingernail.
11. A monkey dances on the stump of a felled tree.—The hand and the drum.

12. A little man has neither eyes nor a nose, neither legs nor arms. He has only a small mouth.—The penis.

*Animals* (nos. 13–22)

13. One (small) basket, one big basket (for storing grain), four mortars, one pestle, one stick and two cigarettes [!].—The elephant (head, body, legs, trunk, tail and tusks).
14. A little man has a tail at two places.—The elephant.
15. It is iron catching it; it is sugar cane eating it.—The monkey (*Macaca radiata*).  
(This riddle refers to a delicacy in the Pañiyas' diet: monkey meat. Although it is "iron", i.e., a hard job, to catch a monkey, eating its meat is as "sweet as sugar cane.")
16. Two glowworms, four pandal posts and one walking stick.—The dog.  
(Pandal=a temporary shed of leaves, cloth, etc., erected for marriages, etc.)  
Cp. Taylor 1951: nos. 1476–1494: Four Hang; Two Point the Way.
17. No matter how much gruel you give a little man; having finished drinking it, he goes and eats excreta.—The dog.
18. A little man sleeps with his head hanging downwards.—The bat.
19. During the six months of the dry season and during the six months of the wet season, a man wears an umbrella. You cannot take it from him.—The tortoise.
20. A little man excretes at the entrance [of his house].—The crab.
21. A little man wags his tail.—The fish.
22. All the children of one father eat tobacco.—The leeches.  
(As children cling to their father's body, so do the leeches; they drop as soon as the juice of well-chewed tobacco is spit upon them.)

*Plants* (nos. 23–31)

23. A man has three yes.—The coconut.  
Cp. Taylor 1951: nos. 523–524: Three Eyes.—Ālu Kuṛumba: Kapp 1984: 309, no. 31: 'Aḍḍa' has six eyes, 'Moḍḍa' has three eyes.—The bamboo flute and the coconut.
24. There are some fruits which we peel with our fingernails. But there is one fruit only which we cannot peel with our fingernails.—The coconut.
25. If we pour water on a man's feet, he will give that water back to us from his head.—The coconut tree and its green fruits (containing the coconut milk).

26. If a (spotted) deer jumps, there are four footprints; but if another deer jumps, there are a thousand footprints.—The jack-fruit (*Artocarpus integrifolia*).  
(When a jack-fruit—a large and heavy fruit—falls from a tree down to the ground, the many “ thorns ” of its skin are scattered round about.)
27. Our children are born from the womb; but the children of somebody else are born from his head.—A bunch of bananas.
28. A little man begets children out of his forearm.—The coffeetree and the coffee berries.
29. The fruit is wrinkled and puckered, the leaf is dentated and serrated.—The bittergourd.
30. If blossoms appear on a certain creeper in this year, you will not see any blossoms nor fruits when those blossoms have withered away. Only after one year has lapsed, you will see those fruits.—The *ci:ye* creeper (*Acacia concinna*).
31. All the children of one father dance and sing in trance.—The leaves of the banyan tree (*Ficus indica*) (which respond to even a gentle breeze by constant trembling and rustling).  
Cp. Taylor 1951: nos. 946–950: A Company of Dancers (Workmen).

*Things* (nos. 32–44)

32. At night a flower garden, by day an empty garden.—The cattle corral.  
Cp. Taylor 1951: no. 1071: Disappear.—The comparison of cows to flowers is noteworthy in this riddle, as it is quite unusual. But since the Paṇiyas are a poverty-stricken community and can only dream of keeping cattle, this comparison could be interpreted in the following manner: As (sweet-scented) flowers are desired for adornment, so (milk-yielding) cows are desired as an ornament of the hamlet. In Indian riddling, usually the sky and the stars are compared to a garden full of flowers, or to a forest “ full of trees ” and the like. Cp. Ālu Kuṛumba: Kapp 1984: 317, no. 67: In the morning—a dreary desert; in the evening—a thick forest.

For an interesting connection of cows with flowers compare a myth of the Dhanwar tribe, living in the Bilaspur District, Madhya Pradesh, India; it runs thus: “An Ahir [=member of a caste of cowherds and milkmen] and his wife were out in the jungle grazing their cattle. It was two days before Diwali [=the Hindu festival of lights] and the leader of the cows talked to the rest of the herd, ‘ In two days’ time there will be the great festival

of the year. How are we to decorate ourselves for it? In my belly live Gondarani and Tiraiyarani, the flowers. But who will make them into garlands?' The Ahir heard what it was saying and begged the leader of the cows to give him the flowers promising that he would make them into garlands. So the cow vomited every kind of flower. They fell to the ground and at once took root and sprang up. The Ahir made the flowers into garlands and put them on the cows.

The cow-Rani [=queen] was pleased and blessed the Ahir saying, 'From today you will always care for us and the world will be full of flowers'" (Elwin 1949: 134, no. 3.). Compare also a myth of the Dhulia caste (of workers in bamboo) of Madhya Pradesh according to which every kind of flower, tree, shrub and creeper sprang up from the flesh and bones of a dead white cow (cp. Elwin 1949: 144, no. 19).

33. When you say, 'Come!', it comes; when you say, 'Go!', it goes.—The door.  
Cp. Taylor 1951: nos. 125–127: Always Goes; Never Moves (no. 127).—Ālu Kuṛumba: Kapp 1984: 306, no. 15: If you say, 'Go!', it goes. If you say, 'Come!', it comes.
34. I am a strong man for keeping guard. You are a little man with a ring.—The lock and the key.  
Ālu Kuṛumba: Kapp 1984: 306, no. 16: A black/ugly man, but a strong man for keeping guard.—The doorlock.
35. A little man eats with his mouth and excretes from his mouth.—The grinding stone.  
Cp. Taylor 1951, no. 240: Eats with Belly; Voids through Back. §4: A mill.—The wording of the Paṇiya riddle is not completely correct—obviously due to a slip of the informant's memory; its second half should run: . . . and excretes from his sides.  
Cp. Pālu Kuṛumba: Kapp 1978: 515, no. 9: Eating with the mouth, but easing itself from its sides.
36. Two snakes dance in an anthill.—The mortar and two pestles. (Abandoned anthills are usually occupied by snakes, especially, by cobras; for particulars, see König 1984: 210–235 (=chapter 6). In this riddle which refers to the pounding of paddy that is usually done by two women simultaneously, the two pestles which are alternately wielded up and down (into one and the same mortar) by the women in a rhythmical manner, are compared to two snakes which move coiling on an anthill.)
37. A bull runs away, but it is hindered by a sooty baldhead.—Boiling gruel and the (blackened) ladle (which prevents it from boiling

- over).
38. A horse which jumps, a horse which runs; if it sees water, a horse which halts.—The sandals.  
Cp. Taylor 1951: no. 458: Goes voer Hills and Plains; Breaks Its Neck at a River.
39. When we call him, the little man comes along with us. When we have returned from there and come home and take a seat, he goes and stands in a corner.—The walking stick.  
Cp. Taylor 1951: nos. 695–699: Goes about the House; Stands in the Corner. § 5: A staff, a cane.—Regarding §1: A broom, cp. Ālu Kuṛumba: Kapp 1984: 308, no. 27: Having licked all the four corners of a room, he/it squats down in a corner.
40. A cock which has been killed here, crows throughout the country.—The oboe (shawm).  
(The body of the oboe or shawm is manufactured from a “cut-off” bamboo.)  
Melenāḍu Irula: Zvelebil 1979: 364, no. 15=Zvelebil 1982: 351, no. 12: A cock is cooing in a cut-off branch.—Pālu Kuṛumba: Kapp 1978: 516, no. 11: A cock crows in a cut-off stem.—Ālu Kuṛumba: Kapp 1984: 308, no. 30: A cock crows in a cut-off bamboo.
41. If you pound a single grain of paddy inside a house, that house will be filled with chaff.—The [striking of a match and the light of the] earthen oil-lamp.  
Cp. Taylor 1951: no. 1473: Small and Fills the House.—Ālu Kuṛumba: Kapp 1984: 306, no. 19: If you pound a single grain of paddy, the whole house is full of husks.—Cp. also Pālu Kuṛumba: Kapp 1978: 515, no. 10: If you buy a thing for only one and three-quarter *annas* (=c. 10 paise), the whole house becomes filled up.—The lamp-oil.
42. A dead deer jumps and a bunch of unripe bananas ripens.—The bellows and the iron in the furnace.  
(This riddle refers to the manufacture of iron tools in a smithy. As a lump of (black) iron gradually “ripens”, i.e., becomes red-hot, so also a bunch of (dark green) bananas ripens, i.e., becomes yellow, little by little.—Bellows are frequently made from deer-skin.)
43. If you put this food in a pot, it cannot be finished, even if a thousand people eat from it.—The lime (only a tiny quantity of which is “eaten” along with the betel-leave and the arecanut).  
Ālu Kuṛumba: Kapp 1984: 319, no. 76: Even if a thousand people eat from a certain loaf of bread they cannot eat it up.

44. When you cut a tree, chips fly about; but if you cut another tree, no chips fly about.—Water (i.e., a watercourse, stream, river, etc.). Cp. Taylor 1951: nos. 1665–1666: Cut It; Cannot See the Cut.—Ālu Kurumba: Kapp 1984: 318, no. 71: You cut and cut, but it does not get cut at all.

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## NOTES

1. According to the Census of India, 1961: 38.068 individuals.
2. According to the Census of India, 1961: 4.779 individuals.
3. The field research was rendered possible by a grant of the Government of India ("six months visiting fellowship") and an additional grant of the German Research Association (DFG).
4. It may be noted that the original texts of the riddles along with literal translations will be presented within the scope of a descriptive grammar of the Paṇiya language (with texts and vocabulary) which is under preparation.
5. Toda: Rivers 1906: 599–600; Emeneau 1984: 407.—Melenāḍu, Vēṭṭekāḍu and Ūrāḷi Iṟula: Zvelebil 1979; Zvelebil 1983: 350–352.—Pālu Kuṟumba: Kapp 1978.—Ālu Kuṟumba: Kapp 1984.—A collection of 41 Bēṭṭu Kuṟumba riddles will soon be ready for publication.

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riddles (350–352); moreover, a Melenāḍu Irula riddle story being a variant of the 25th *Veṭāḷapaṅcaviṅkāṭi* story (384) and an Ū-rāḷi Irula riddle story (394).)