MANNAN Tribe of Kerala

The Mannan tribe is largely found in Idukki's Kumily Panchayat, with smaller groups living in Adimali and Devikulam. Though they were moved from their ancestral forest homes to the outskirts of the Periyar Tiger Reserve due to government regulations, they have successfully preserved their distinct rituals. A standout feature of their culture is their enduring monarchy; the community continues to recognize and deeply respect their own king to this day.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 : About The Community

We travelled to the mid ranges of Idukki in the Western Ghats to collaborate with the Mannan community, an Indigenous group recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in Kerala. Our initial meeting with the Mannan leadership took place at Kovilmala, Kattapana, where we discussed the scope and expectations of the work. The team was warmly invited to attend upcoming community festivals, which offered an opportunity to observe and document their cultural practices directly. As the engagement progressed, a broader understanding of the community's geography, cultural systems, and their nuances began to take shape.

During our fieldwork among the Mannan community, we saw a society deeply anchored in its traditions and historical memory. The Mannan people are primarily settled in the forested regions of the Idukki district, and many community members explained to us that the very name Mannan is derived from a Tamil term meaning "King." This meaning is not merely symbolic; it resonates strongly with the community's rich and complex system of governance, which continues to follow a traditional monarchic structure. Locally, this system is referred to as "Naalu Mannan - Naalu Vaathi - Onpathu Kaani - Pathulamthaari Pathulamthaarichi Chattam," a phrase that encapsulates their socio-political order.

As we moved from hamlet to hamlet, community members shared oral traditions tracing their ancestral migration from the Madurai region of Tamil Nadu to the Western Ghats of Idukki. These stories passed down orally through myths, narratives, and generational memory. They varied slightly from one region to another, yet they all had a common origin. While the routes and reasons for the migration differed across stories, the connection to Madurai remained a constant thread. This variation in detail, we realized, reflects the fluid nature of oral storytelling: each retelling adapts subtly to suit the audience or the times, ensuring both continuity and relevance.

In discussing demographic details, we encountered significant disparities. Kerala Government State Reports from 2013 record the Mannan population at approximately 9,345. However, several members of the community firmly insisted that their actual numbers range between 50,000 and

70,000. The current Mannan King, Raman Rajamannan, recounted to us a rough population survey he once undertook across their settlements, estimating the number to be around 20,000 at the time. These contrasts highlight the gap between official data and community perceptions, a pattern not uncommon in Indigenous population records.

Throughout our interactions, it became evident that myth and history coexist seamlessly in the collective memory of the Mannan people. Multiple versions of their past circulate within the community, shaped by regional nuances and the natural evolution of oral accounts. Yet, beneath these variations lies a shared sense of identity, and a connection to their origins and to the traditions they continue to uphold.

> “The community originated from a region called Mahendragiri in Tamil Nadu. The then ‘Mannan community’ lost a war with the Mahendragiri rajas and were forced to migrate from the region to the borders of Madurai, due to the aftermath of war and loss. They were later captured by the soldiers of Madurai kingdom and provided asylum after understanding their circumstances. They were provided with food, shelter and an opportunity to find livelihood under the Madurai Kingdom. A fort called ‘Mannan Kota’ was built here for the Mannan community. It is from here, as per Mannan belief, that further migration happened to the western ghat forest of Idukki, as the community was sent to harvest cane from the forest. Initially four community members went in search of cane, namely Aalpandyan, Paalpandyan, Theepandyan, Cholpandyan. They were impressed by the abundance of the forest with eggs of tortoise and monitor lizard, wild tubers, crabs and fishes etc. After making multiple trips into the forest for cane harvesting, the group eventually settled in the forest during their third trip and never returned to Madurai. Later, search parties came looking for the Mannan scouts, who also settled within the forest and never went back. This migration happened mainly in 3 routes and settled accordingly at various locations in Idukki : (i) Kombam route and settled at central region, eastern forest area, (ii) Boodhi route and settled at Mannankandam, Adimali region & (iii) Cumbum route, who settled at Kumali region.”
>
> - Sooryapathbhanabhan, Maniyarankudi

In Mazhuvadi, we met Rajappan, a Kaani elder who told us that he, too, had heard these stories about his ancestors. However, he finds it difficult to believe the narrative of people settling in the forest because they were impressed by its abundance. Instead, he emphasizes the version in which the Mannan community crossed the now-Kerala borders under the guidance of the Panthalam Kingdom, to oversee and manage the forest lands.

The Poonjar Connection

In our conversations with Raman Rajamannan, the 16th and current King of the Mannan community, he narrated the history of the community in relation to the Poonjar Dynasty. According

to his account, Kulothanga Cholaman II and Kulashekhara Pandyan fought a war in what is now Tamil Nadu, after which the defeated Kulashekhara Pandyan migrated across the border from Madurai to present-day Kerala, where he became known as Chirayu Varman. He is said to have built the Poonjar Palace in Kottayam, the Kannaki Temple in Kumali, and the Dharmasastha temple during his reign. The community that accompanied him, Kurum-mannarukar, the Naatturajakanmar who once ruled small patches of land in Tamil Nadu, settled in Kerala and came to be known as the Mannan community. They lived in and around Poonjar for 3-4 centuries and were bestowed with responsibilities to manage the forest lands, providing tribute to the Poonjar dynasty. Eventually, this connection between the Mannan community and Poonjar gradually faded during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Elders have cautioned
As per Suryapadhbhanabhan from Maniyaran Kudi, it is believed that the real history of the Mannan community is present in the Poonjar palace. Sections of land under the Poonjar kingdom lie in between the Mannan lands of Aaradiyan Thollayirapuram, near the banks of Periyar, on the sides of Kottukathalay, Idiyude Peraaru. Poonjar Kingdom gave these lands on lease to the Mannan community during olden times. Community elders have cautioned not to talk about certain parts of Mannan history related to Poonjattu Thampuran and others, lest unfavourable events might occur.

Nearly 97 percent of the Mannan community are inhabitants of Idukki District, settled across more than forty hamlets. These settlements are referred to as Mannakudi. Each settlement has a chieftain known as the Kaani, who oversees governance and welfare of the residents. There are minor discrepancies within the community on the actual list of the settlements as a few settlements have been relocated, some dwindled, and some have newly formed.

Although the Mannan community once lived a nomadic life within the dense forests, most settlements have since been displaced and rehabilitated for various reasons. One of the main reasons for the rehabilitation includes the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980 and related conservation policies by the forest department and the government. Idukki dam and reservoir construction were also a major reason for displacement among the Mannan community. In the aftermath, the communities were displaced from their original place of residence within the forest and were forced away into other locations.

Decoding history through memories
Ulakan Kaani from Kumily recalls the community originally came to Vandiperiyar first, during the British ruling era. Community elders used to live at Thankamala. Kozhikkanam, Mlaavapara village Mullathodu. Amma Maharani (Thiruvithaamkur Maharani) resettled the Mannan community from these regions to the present day Kumily settlement. During the British colonial era incidents of cholera and tiger attacks, along with Idukki reservoir construction and subsequent flooding of then farming lands, were also reasons for resettlement, as recalled by Rajan, an elder from Kumily hamlet.
Rajan recalls how the community thus came down from Mlaavapara and settled under the protection of Rajashree Valiyathurai by residing around his house. They used to venture into the forest nearby for farming and collecting cardamom, honey, thelli (millets) etc. These were also given as tribute to Rajashree Valiyathurai. Later the land for Kumali settlement was given to the then Kaani named Kuppan Kaani, under the Kuppaan Vanavakasha Committee.

Through our field interactions with community members, it became increasingly evident to us that alongside displacement and rehabilitation, the Mannan community has undergone a significant crisis of survival and identity, having lost much of their former way of life and livelihood. Once an agrarian community that farmed and lived with resilience across vast forest lands, they are now compelled to find their footing within constrained and congested plots of 3–5 cents, with few viable livelihood options.

We also came across accounts of land allocated to the community being sold to individuals outside the community. These incidents were linked to the challenges the Mannan faced in the new era of capitalism, where money was a relatively new concept to their cultural and economic life.

Chapter 2 : Social Life

During our fieldwork, community members recalled that in the early days the Mannan lived a nomadic life, practicing shifting agriculture across vast stretches of forest land. Over time, however, they were displaced from these forest areas and compelled to settle in various locations, either directly or indirectly provided by the government. They attributed this to several factors, including the implementation of Forest Act protection rules, the construction of reservoirs and resulting flooding, and encroachment by outsiders for plantation activities.

It is commonly believed that the Mannan community once lived across 42 hamlets in Idukki district. Some of these settlements have since dwindled, while others have been relocated. Neither government records nor community sources contain definitive data on the exact number of settlements or the total population, and even the mapping of the original 42 hamlets elicited multiple viewpoints within the community.

In most current settlements, we found that the community resides on revenue land provided by the government, holding only a possession certificate (kaivasha avakasham) rather than a land deed (pattayam). This arrangement has created a sense of dependency and insecurity, limiting the community’s ability to achieve full autonomy. At the same time, it offers some protection by preventing the land from being sold through unfair trade practices, particularly during times of financial strain.

Community members also described a distinctive architectural tradition that once reflected their close relationship with nature and collective life. Earlier, house construction was a well-preserved skill, taking approximately two months and using natural materials such as wooden sticks, bamboo frames, and wild leaves. Building was a communal effort involving 10 to 30 people under the guidance of the Kaani, with labour shared across tasks like foraging leaves, cutting timber, and preparing food. Today, however, cultural changes have led the community, like many others, toward a more capitalist mode of living, and most families now reside in concrete houses built through government housing schemes. Concerns were frequently voiced regarding the quality of these structures, particularly reports of cracks and leaky roofs.

CGH Earth Case Study
The traditional Mannan architectural style has been adopted in the tourism property Spice Village i Kumily by a hospitality firm, CGH Earth. Earlier, members of the Mannan community were employe for roof thatching and periodic maintenance. However, challenges have arisen due to (i) the scarci of the specific wild grass used in roofing and (ii) the lack of skilled artisans within the community. I recent years, CGH Earth has had to train immigrant workers from Tamil Nadu to preserve and continue this architectural technique for their huts and cottages.

Mura System: A System Co-dependance

Mannan community follows a strict clan system. This system of kinship informs almost all of the elements of Mannan culture and socio-political organisation. The whole of Mannan community is divided into two sections of clans, namely Aravakudi and Paneekudi. Though loosely called as 25 Paneekudi and Arava Ayyayiram, there are only 35 total sub clans within this system. There are multiple descriptions from hamlet to hamlet in quantifying the sub clans. According to the current king, Raman Rajamannan there are 20 sub clans of Aravakkudi and 15 sub clans of Paneekkudi in total.

As the Mannan community mainly follows a matrilineal system, the clan assignment also happens in the same way with marriages involving exogamy. Marriages within the same clans were once strictly prohibited and are believed to bring in God’s fury.

People of administrative power are mainly from the Paneekudi clan. The Mannan king is from Valiyakunakudi sub-clan from Paneekudi division and apart from that all other clans are said to be equal in power, without a structured vertical hierarchy.

We have heard multiple stories and come across many incidents where the community observes a mura system based on this family lineage. In this system for every family there exists a pullakutti, a corresponding family lineage who will be tasked with their protection and well-being. For example, for an individual in Paneekudi, a sub clan of Aravakudi will act as a pullakutti and vice versa. This system of accompanying is followed in many of the Mannan rituals such as Pongal, as well as during instances when the community treks to the forest.

Story of Livelihood: Past and Present

The Mannan community once led a rich agrarian life centered on shifting cultivation. Small forested plots were cleared for farming, cultivated for a season, and then left fallow as new plots were

prepared. They grew traditional varieties of rice and millets, practicing collective farming that emphasized cooperation and shared responsibility. The harvest was stored and distributed among all members, ensuring sustenance for the entire community. Agriculture was not an isolated livelihood activity like today, but an integral part of their culture, deeply interwoven with their beliefs, rituals, and festivals. Even marriage ceremonies were timed with the harvest cycle, celebrated through the Kalaavoottu festival and its associated rituals. In addition to cultivated crops, the community shares stories of their once rich life with sustainable and rich food habits through forest products.

Kurumbpullu : A Lost Tradition

One notable forest produce, Kurumbpullu, was widely consumed and used to prepare a traditional dish called katti, reflecting the community's connection to their natural environment and culinary traditions.
Ramani shared the memories of Kurumbpullu farming from her memories "We clear small patches of forest and grow our own food. Until the month of Onam, the forest provides us with plenty to eat. After that, we plant Kurumbpullu and other crops. When the harvest is ready, we dry the grains, powder them, and use them to make katti."
Nagamma told us how katti was prepared: "To prepare katti, we heat water on a firewood stove and add pullu (finger millet). We hold the pot steady with a mathukol, a two-pronged wooden stick and stir the mixture with an idikambu. Once it thickens, the katti is ready. We usually eat it with anavu, a side dish often made with dried fish and other ingredients. The meal is served and eaten on leaves."

After the resettlement of many hamlets, the community experienced significant disruption in their livelihood. Aggressive resettlement policies and development encroachment restricted their access to traditional lands and resources for agriculture, challenging their ability to sustain their cultural and economic practices.

"Around 1977-78, Mannan families from Chinnapara earned their livelihood by selling firewood in nearby Adimali township at a rate of Rs. 2 per stack. In addition to cash, we often received food items and fruits like jackfruit and mangoes in exchange. There was a scarcity of seeds at that time. We used to collect fallen seeds in this journey for our farming needs. This system continued until the 1990s but gradually declined due to stricter forest regulations and migration within the community."

- Raju Mani, Chinnapara

Today, the community is not actively pursuing traditional agriculture as it is largely nonviable due to land scarcity and conflicts with wildlife. Many community members have now shifted to newer

work sources such as masons, daily wage laborers, or in limited agricultural and plantation work in nearby towns. Some Mannan hamlets on the forest fringes of Kumily benefit from employment as forest watchers, guides, or through community-based tourism initiatives organized under the Department of Forest and Wildlife’s ecotourism programs.

As we travelled across various settlements, we found that opportunities were uneven across different settlements. Restricted access to income-generating activities pose significant challenges in many hamlets. A few elders from various regions have commented how most students leave school after completing the 10th standard and plus two, while only a few continue to undergraduate studies and attempt government employment. Only a small number seems to secure jobs, and engagement in private sector work remains minimal, apart from a few individuals employed in local shops. Raju Mani recalls how their life was quite challenging post displacement of their settlement and how in today's world they are able to find stable income in the form of salaries.

This transition reflects the community’s ongoing struggle to adapt to a pro-capitalist economy while maintaining cultural identity and traditional knowledge.

Rituals: from birth to death

Birth: In earlier times, great-grandmothers or other senior women in the household oversaw childbirth. Prayers were offered to the Mannan deity for a safe delivery. When a delivery was delayed, the community sometimes consulted Kodangi, a divination practice comparable to astrology. In such situations, a name associated with the Mannan deity was assigned to the unborn child to ensure a healthy delivery.

It is believed that newborns should carry the names of their gods or ancestral elders. This initial name, referred to as chavar peru or chaami peru, is considered essential for a safe birth. Examples of such names mentioned by community members include Thevi, Thevan, Rami, Raman, and Chakkan.

Certain regions within Mannan settlements observed additional rituals related to childbirth. In the Chinnapara region, a practice known as Kallu Kondu Iduka takes place during the first year after birth. After the infant is born, the parents receive a blessed stone from the ooru karmi (the ritual specialist of the hamlet). The family then visits the Manappadan Kaani, a sacred site, to perform a prayer ritual and place the blessed stone in a designated area. This act is understood as seeking

protection and blessings for the child.

Vannakkoora

“If you start menstruating, you’re supposed to move to the vannakoora, a house built about 7-8 feet away from the main house. The man is supposed to stand guard for wild animals with a lit chootu lamp. Earlier, the vannakoora was always in use, but not anymore. These days, menstruating women stay in a room near the kitchen inside the house itself. In Kumili, there are still separate structures for this, with separate washrooms. For these 5-7 days, they won’t use the same washrooms as others. Even food will be kept separately for the menstruating woman before anyone else eats. We do this so that no wrath comes our way”.

- Rajamma & Maniyamma

Marriage: Mannan community traditionally practiced a system of community marriage, in which several marriages were conducted on the same day during the Kaalayootu festival. These ceremonies took place at the residence of the chieftain, the Kaani, and the associated expenses were borne by him.

Marriage practices are structured through a strict clan system. Members of the same clan are not permitted to marry one another, as such unions are believed to invoke divine displeasure and potentially lead to severe consequences, including death. Instead, the internal caste structure of the community outlines specific and permissible marriage alliances between clans. Individuals who violated these rules were, in earlier times, expelled from the hamlet in accordance with community regulations. In recent years, however, marriages outside this system have become more common, reflecting broader social and cultural changes.

Community members also described a traditional practice in which a prospective bride or groom would reside in the in-laws’ household for a period ranging from six months to one year prior to marriage. This stay served as an assessment period during which elders of the host family evaluated the individual’s suitability. During this time, the prospective spouse is engaged in tasks such as housekeeping, construction, foraging, forest maintenance, and farming. Designated elders observed their conduct and skills and later conveyed their decision to the Kaani, who then informed the families and granted or withheld approval for the marriage.

> “I recall my own experience vividly. My mother arranged my marriage. One late evening, while I was near a fire roasting jackfruit seeds and seeking warmth, I saw my mother approaching with a woman from the community. I understood immediately what was happening. The bride-to-be stayed for six months at my house, performing her duties, without speaking to me or looking at me. After the elders gave their approval, our marriage was formalized.
> I belong to the group of Murukan worshipers, while my wife follows the deity Krishnan. In the event of any ailment or misfortune, she prays to her Gods for me, and I pray to mine for her. In our community, marrying within the same sub-caste is believed to prevent the Gods from listening to prayers, which can put one’s life at risk.”
>
> - Rajappan, Mazhuvadi

Death: In the event of a death, we were told that koothu is performed for one night in the hamlet. Beyond this, there are few immediate ritualistic practices at the time of death. Spiritual performers, termed karmi, visit the house and designate a spot for digging the grave. The remaining karmis engage in prayers during the proceedings. After the burial, a small thatched roof shed is constructed over the grave, and incense sticks are lit and placed around it.

For a year following the death, relatives of the deceased adhere to rules associated with pela, including the preparation of separate food, referred to as choru vekkal. The spouse generally refrains from wearing flowers, earrings, or garlands for a period of three years. During the annual Kaalavootu festival, the Payayil Iruthal ritual is performed at these households, continuing for a duration of three years.

Payayil Iruthal: Mourning Ritual of the Mannan Community

Payayil Iruthal (also called Payel Iruthal) is a traditional mourning ritual practiced by the Mannan community of Kerala. The ritual is performed by the spouse of a deceased individual to honour their memory, traditionally for three consecutive years, and involves a period of intense grieving, remembrance, and gradual healing.

During the ritual, the spouse lays out a mat (paya) along with designated pooja items arranged in a prescribed manner. Food items such as rice, curry, and coffee are placed to invite the spirit of the deceased, and sometimes personal items like a betel pack are included, depending on the habits of the departed. A mat is reserved specifically for the spirit, which is believed to inhabit it for the duration of seven days each year.

The spouse remains seated on this mat for seven continuous days, abstaining from all work. Family members provide food, and the spouse is allowed only short walks within the house and toilet breaks. Both male and female spouses participate, following gender-specific observances: men refrain from cutting hair or shaving, while women remove ornaments such as earrings and necklaces during the ritual.

Community elders, including the Kaanikkaran, Pullavashi, or Ilayaraja, oversee the ritual to ensure it is conducted according to tradition, guiding the spouse and relatives regarding their responsibilities. After the seven days, the elders revisit the household to formally conclude the ritual. The mat is shaken three times to symbolically remove the spirit, and the spouse, accompanied by in-laws, visits the deceased’s graveyard for further prayers. Here, they cry briefly and offer prayers to ensure the spirit transitions to the afterlife, returning only when called for protection or guidance.

The ritual concludes with a ceremonial bath, after which family members, typically the sister-in-law, assist the spouse in dressing and adorning her with flowers, jewelry, and other ornaments to mark her return to daily life. This deeply humane practice culminates in Kaalavoottu, a vibrant festival celebrating life and illustrating how sorrow is transformed into healing through ritual and tradition.

In the hamlets we visited during the course of our fieldwork, we encountered Mannan Bhaasha, the Mannan language. The language appeared distinctive, with considerable differences from both Malayalam and Tamil, despite some members of the community describing it as a mixture of the two. While Mannan Bhaasha does incorporate many Malayalam and Tamil words, it also possesses its own vocabulary, tonal patterns, and phonetic features that set it apart as a language in its own right.

We observed that older members of the community spoke a thicker and more fluent form of Mannan Bhaasha, whereas among younger age groups there was a noticeable increase in the use of Malayalam vocabulary. This shift appears closely tied to formal education. Schools attended by Mannan children, often Model Residential Schools established for tribal students, play a significant role in the gradual erosion of the language. Both children and adults recounted experiences of being shamed or subjected to ridicule by teachers and peers for speaking Mannan Bhaasha.

Elders expressed concern that Malayalam is now spoken more frequently than Mannan Bhaasha in many households, particularly in homes with children. The intergenerational transmission of the language is thus weakening. At present, there appear to be no organised efforts aimed at the preservation or revival of Mannan Bhaasha, further heightening anxieties about its future within the community.

Chapter 3 : Mannankoothu & Koothu Paattukal

Mannankoothu is a traditional cultural dance performance of the Mannan community, combining expressive movements with Mannankoothu songs, and accompanied by traditional instruments and accessories. Community members talked about the Koothu as an important part of social and cultural life that brings people together through music and storytelling. The narratives enacted in Mannankoothu are based on the legendary tale of *Kannaki* and *Kovalan*, though the Mannan version differs slightly from the classic Tamil Sangam epic *Silappathikaram*. Through rhythmic songs, vibrant dance, and symbolic gestures, the community preserves and retells this story in a distinct cultural form.

In earlier times, Mannankoothu was performed weekly under the guidance of the *Kaani*, or chieftain, within each hamlet. The performance has undergone changes over time due to internal shifts and external pressures, gradually transitioning from a form of social theater to a dance performance. Some traditional songs have been replaced by Malayalam songs. Today, Mannankoothu is primarily performed during annual festivals such as Kaalavootu and Pongal, or on special occasions, including the passing of prominent community members.

In an attempt to revive the performance and its cultural significance, a segment of Mannankoothu has evolved into a tourism attraction as well. Community members expressed diverse opinions about this adaptation, noting that ritual nuances are often modified for tourism.

Mythological Origin of Mannan-Koothu

According to the beliefs of the Mannan community, Mannankoothu was founded by two ancestral brothers, *Panchampoolan* and *Periyanankan*. Guided by *Poolappan Poolan Kaani*, the brothers approached two sisters, *Valuvakotha* and *Valuvachakki*, who were known for their mastery of the art of Koothu. Many had tried to learn from the sisters before but had failed. The sisters agreed to teach the brothers, but with a condition that only one of them could be taught the art directly. As a result, the elder brother, *Panchampoolan*, learned within the *gurukulam*, while *Periyanankan*

learned the craft from outside.

After the training, the sisters gave the brothers a test. They were asked to demonstrate their learning by causing a tree to wilt and burn. *Panchampoolan* could wilt the tree, but *Periyanankan*, with his focused gaze, set it ablaze. Impressed by their devotion and skill, the sisters blessed them both.

The brothers later returned to their hamlets and shared their knowledge with their people. It is believed that they formed the rhythm, structure, and style of Mannankoothu, passing it down through generations of the Mannan community.

Costume and Makeup in Mannankoothu

Mannankoothu features different types of characters, including male, female, and comedian roles. Traditionally, only men performed in the Koothu, with male performers also taking on female roles by dressing up as females. In recent times, there is a subtle shift through the participation of elderly women and young girls, marking a shift in tradition and helping to revive this age-old art form.

The male and female characters perform rhythmic dances to Koothu songs that narrate the story of *Kannaki* and *Kovalan*. The comedian character keeps the audience engaged and awake throughout the night, as the performance begins after dusk and continues until the next day at dawn.

In earlier times, makeup was done using ash, soot, and sandalwood paste. Costumes were made from materials like tree bark and a paste prepared from wild *arayani*. Today, performers wear modern attire such as sarees, churidars, dhotis, and shirts, blending traditional themes with contemporary expressions.

Mannankoothu Songs and Structure

The Mannan community believes that there are about eighty-five Koothu songs in existence. These songs have been passed down through generations as part of an oral tradition. They narrate the story of *Kannaki* and *Kovalan*, from their birth to *Kannaki's* arrival in Kerala. While the songs are

inspired by the *Silappathikaram* epic, the Mannan version introduces its own variations in narrative and detail.

In earlier times, Mannankoothu was performed over seven days, with each stage presenting a portion of the *Kannaki - Kovalan* story. Today, the performance is usually limited to a single night due to changes in lifestyle and livelihood patterns.

The first three songs, known as *Daiva Pattukal* (divine songs), are particularly significant. They express the community's reverence for the gods, ancestors, and the king, and are sung to seek permission and blessings before the performance begins. These songs are usually performed separately in a corner near the main arena.

The performance concludes with the *Mangalam* song. During this final act, a bowl of water is placed at the center of the arena; it is later sprinkled around the space to mark the ritual end of the Koothu.

Traditionally, Mannankoothu included a blend of songs, verses, and storytelling. However, this older structure is now fading, with most performances featuring only the songs. Some elders in the community still remember the complete version and share their knowledge to preserve it.

Folk songs called *Muripaattukal* were once interwoven with the Koothu to depict scenes from everyday life - such as farming in the forest, interpersonal relationships, or lullabies. These songs also provided rest intervals for the lead singers. In recent times, Malayalam songs are often used in place of *Muripaattukal*, as many traditional tunes have been lost.

Efforts are now being made to revive the older form of Mannankoothu and its traditional songs. Mani from Chinnapara notes that younger members of the community are learning the ancient methods, working to bring back the authentic rhythm and essence of their cultural heritage.

Musical Instruments in Mannan-Koothu

Three main musical instruments or accessories are integral to Mannankoothu:
(i) Mathalam (ii) Chilanka (iii) Ilathalam.

The instrumentalists sit on a wooden platform known as *benchikol* or *kol*, which serves as their stage. The Mathalam player is seated in the front row, followed by the lead singer and other instrumentalists, with the chorus singers and learners forming the final line. This arrangement reflects both the hierarchy and the collaborative nature of the performance.

Mathalam: Mathalam is a percussion drum traditionally crafted from the wood of the *kumbil* tree (White Teak - *Gmelina arborea*) and fitted with the skin of the *udumb* (Monitor Lizard - *Varanus bengalensis*) on one side and the skin of *Koora* deer (Indian Spotted Chevrotain - *Moschiola indica*) on the other side. As hunting monitor lizards is now prohibited, goat skin is used instead. Due to the scarcity of mature *kumbil* trees - which are mostly found deep in the forest - jackfruit wood is now often used as an alternative.

We learned that many families continue to use Mathalams made by their ancestors, replacing only the drum skin when necessary. The making of a Mathalam is considered sacred and involves a ritual performed by the *Moorikar*, a particular sub-group within the community. This ritual includes prayers and the preparation of a dish called *Ada*, traditionally made from ragi millet, though wheat is also used today.

The Mathalam and other instruments hold divine significance for the community. Before entering the Mannankoothu arena, performers bow before the Mathalam to seek its blessings, followed by prayers to the Earth Goddess (*Bhoomi Devi*). These acts of reverence reflect the community's deep spiritual connection to their art form and its sacred instruments.

Chilanka: Chilanka is a jingling ornament tied around the dancers' ankles, producing rhythmic sounds that enhance the tempo of the performance. Each step of the dancer adds to the musical flow of the Koothu, blending movement and sound. Symbolically, the Chilanka represents *Kannaki's chilambu* (anklet) from the *Kannaki - Kovalan* tale, connecting the performance to its mythological roots.

Ilathalam / Chalara: Ilathalam, also known as Chalara, is a small metallic percussion instrument resembling miniature cymbals. It is used to create sharp, distinctive chimes that mark rhythm and transitions in the Koothu songs. The clear ringing of the Ilathalam complements the deeper tones of the Mathalam, adding texture and balance to the overall musical ensemble.

Women in Koothu

Traditionally, women of the Mannan community did not perform Mannankoothu. One major reason for this restriction is the presence of Ayyappa worship and related rituals within the performance, which prohibit participation by menstruating women. Elderly women, however, were sometimes allowed to take part. Another reason lies in the belief that the Koothu arena is protected by magical spells cast by learned elders. Women generally avoided entering these spaces, fearing potential repercussions from these protective rituals.

In recent times, these restrictions have become more flexible. As the number of elders skilled in such ritual magic has declined, the sense of fear has lessened. Some teenage girls have started showing interest in Koothu performances, though they usually refrain from participating during ritualistic occasions. While a few elders express concern about possible unfavorable outcomes, many within the community welcome these efforts as a positive step towards the revival and continuation of Mannankoothu.

Written from conversations with Radha and Rejitha, who actively perform the Mannankoothu today.

Mannankoothu and its evolution

Mannankoothu has found a new platform through tourism initiatives in Kumily, supported by the Department of Forest and Wildlife under the Eco-Development Committee (EDC) scheme. Daily performances are held at the Vanashree Auditorium in Kumily. Earlier, the program also included visits to tribal hamlets and a museum experience, but at present, only the performance continues as an active component.

The integration of Koothu into tourism began as a revival effort by the Mannan community at their Kumily settlement. For nearly fifty years, the community faced challenges in preserving their cultural practices. Between 1998 and 2000, a conscious effort was made to learn, document, and revive Koothu. In 2009, the community established their own cultural center at Kumily, marking a significant step in this revival journey.

The community’s earlier performances revealed that the traditional, unstructured version of Koothu struggled to hold audience attention. This led to discussions on adapting Koothu for modern viewers while preserving its essence. Drawing inspiration from earlier special performances led by Thevan Rajamannan, visual and rhythmic elements were refined for stage appeal. Costumes were created using bark from the sacred *Incha Kodi* tree, and necklaces were made from *Badraksham* (

Elaeocarpus tuberculatus), another revered tree. Rhythmic dance steps were added to the narrative songs, giving the performance a more structured and engaging form.

Following the establishment of the EDC programs, Koothu performances moved from the community's own cultural space to the Forest Department's cultural centre. To better suit tourism contexts, the duration was shortened to about one hour, and audience interaction was added by inviting guests on stage.

Biju, a community member, expresses hope that the traditional version of Koothu will one day find equal recognition in tourism. At the same time, he acknowledges the success of the Kumily model as a promising example of how Mannankoothu can adapt, sustain itself, and continue to represent the cultural identity of the Mannan community.

Links to Mannankoothu songs and performances

1. Nalla Ennoorunthan Thevarkalellam / □□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

This prayer song is traditionally sung at the beginning of the Mannan Koothu performance, offering respect to the 800 Mannan deities of the land and seeking their blessings. It is performed before the enactment of the *Kannaki - Kovilan* segment of the Koothu.

2. Nammal Arare Pere Cholli Aaduvene / □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□

This prayer song is sung as a tribute to the ancestral founders of the Mannankoothu, *Panchanpoolan* and *Periyanankan*. They are praised in the song as a way of seeking their blessings.

3. Oh Raja Raja Chola Raja / □ □□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□

This prayer song is sung to pay tribute to the King and the great elders of the community.

4. Nalla Rottoram Veettukari / □□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□

This is a *Muripaattu* song that describes a rural woman and admires her colorful saree, graceful walk and adornments.

5. Cholam Vithakkapona Muthamma / □□□□ □□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□

This song describes an elderly woman, Muthamma, and her actions in cultivating crops like corn, ragi, and millets, such as sowing the seeds, cutting weeds, etc..

6. Inji Manji Valinadandho Vanjikodiye Paaru / □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□

This is a *Muripaattu* song that describes the natural landscape, including rocky terrain, dense forests, and wild animals.

7. Chandramathipinen Kuyilo / □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□

This song is a dialogue with the moon, asking it to light up the forest with moonlight as *Kannaki* and *Kovalan* walk through it.

8. Chinnankara Vanthath Ennen Karayo / □□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□

This is a *Muripattu* song describing the land, and praising the land of the king.

9. Nalle Kallu Mele Makane Eera Venda / □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□ □□□□□

This is a *Kannaki-Kovilan* song in which the young Kovilan is advised to be careful and cautious while playing in the forest, climbing rocks, or scaling trees.

10. Ayya Varaaru Theppethu Madura Vittei / □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□

This is a hunting related song, where the preparations, journey and sights during the hunting are explained through the lyrics.

11. Kalludachu Kinarum Ketti / □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□

This song is referred to as '*pani paattu*', in which daily life activities are sung. In this song, tasks related to digging a well, fencing the yard, and caring for an infant are described.

12. Nalla Chandena Mamaram Allellallo / □□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□□□

This is one of the *Kannaki - Kovalan* songs. In this song, a pleasant spring season is described within the lyrics, reflecting the happy phase in the life of Kannaki.

13. Periyath Thanniyile Vadivela / □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□

The song is used to describe a woman in her daily routine, taking bath, grooming, and getting ready in a playful banter.

14. Nalla Chathiyumilleyo Chanangalomilla / □□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□

The song describes the situation where the Pandya King orders to execute *Kovalan*. *Kovalan's* loneliness is reflected in the song.

15. Mangalam Paattu / □□□□□ □□□□□□

The Mangalam song is sung as the concluding act in the arc of Mannan Koothu.

Chapter 4 : Governance System

When we arrived in the Mannan settlements, the first thing that struck us was how deeply decentralised, well-structured, and intricately distributed their governance system is. This system of governance is known as ‘Naalu Mannan - Naalu Vaathi - Onpathu Kaani - Pathulamthaari Pathulamthaarichi Chattam’.

The community follows a monarchic style of governance, led by a single King who serves as the prime decision-maker. Kingship is transferred matrilineally through the marumakkathayam system of inheritance. The King acts as the head of the community and presides over all major decisions, supported by a structured hierarchy of leaders and advisors. The administrative headquarters of the Mannan community is located at Kovilmala in the Idukki District. In the Mannan language, the King is referred to as Varakku Malan or Valiya Moopan.

The major governing positions of the Mannan governance include :

(i) The King (Rajamannan),

(ii) Nine Kaani individuals, execution committee, consisting of elderly chieftains (Kaani)

(iii) Four Moopanmar individuals, sub-rulers who governs various regions of the designated Mannan kingdom

(iv) Four Vaathi individuals, who are elders well versed with magic and spells

(v) Urali Samithi, individuals who are designated for law and order enforcement within the community.

(vi) Pathulamthaari and Pathulamthaarichikal, youth members in the community who are assigned tasks during community events.

Even though the Mannan governance system is highly structured, we observed in the community several disruptions in its practice and continuity. In many hamlets, traditional systems are not fully functional as described, due to multiple factors. The passing of elders and the resulting

interruptions in the transmission of cultural knowledge to younger generations emerged as a major contributor to these disruptions.

Cultural shifts have also contributed to the gradual weakening of this indigenous governance system and its underlying values. The changing aspirations of the younger generation have likewise played a role in this transition.

We also noted differences of opinion regarding leadership positions and their associated powers across regions and hamlets, which will be discussed in the following section. These variations appear largely due to the absence of written documentation, as well as the differences that arise from oral transmission of histories and the regional diversity of narratives.

The Mannan Kingdom, Regional Divisions and 4 Mannans

Along with the King, there exist four different moopans, referred to as 4 mannans, who govern the various regions of the Mannan kingdom. We have found that these Moopans are assisted by Yuvarajakanmar in some regions. These regions are defined based on geographical divisions.

There are multiple narratives within the community on the formation of the four Mannans and transition to a single King. Some share their stories with the King being selected from the initial system of four Mannan governance for the ease of governance. But some believe the King was always there and the four Mannans were later appointed to assist the King. All four individuals are considered equal in the system of Mannan governance within their designated region. With the existence of said variations and current broken systems, it is difficult to arrive at a singular narrative on the exact nature of functionality and relationship of the single King and four Mannans.

The multiple narratives on the four Mannan moopans and the division of sub kingdoms, their nomenclature can be found in Annexure – IV.

The Mannan King (Valiyamoopan / Varakkumalan)

The King serves as the supreme head and guardian of the Mannan community, overseeing welfare, administration, and ritual matters. The title passes through a matrilineal succession system in accordance with the community’s customs. Alongside the King, there is an Ilaya Moopan or Ilaya Rajavu, who assists in governance at Kovilmala. The king is termed as Valiyamoopan or

Varakkumalan in the Mannan system.

The current King, Raman Rajamannan, is considered by many community members to be the sixteenth ruler in this line. Others believe he is the fourteenth. This variation reflects a general uncertainty among the people regarding the exact number of past rulers, as there is no written documentation to confirm the succession sequence. The community collectively recalls three previous Kings: Ariyan Rajamannan, Thevan Rajamannan, and Nayan Rajamannan.

The Origin

A few elders narrated that the four Moopans, who were initially equal in power, once met together and collectively decided to crown one among them, Varakkumalan, as the King. This was to ensure unity and easier coordination, as frequent travel between regions was difficult in the olden days. Raman Rajamannan has a different narrative to the origin and evolution of Varakkumalan. He believes the King and his other 4 Moopans evolved naturally when the initial kings understood he couldn't manage governing the whole of Mannan territory alone.

There are multiple narratives within the community regarding the identity of its first king. One such account, attributed to Raman Rajamannan, identifies Veeran Thevan as the first ruler. This narrative situates Veeran Thevan’s origins within a ritual and marginal social context, tracing his rise to authority through a combination of ritual power, royal recognition, and territorial conflict.

According to Raman Rajamannan, Veeran Thevan was the son of a poojari who performed ritual duties at the Kanjiyar temple. Despite this association, Veeran Thevan was not publicly recognised and is described as having grown up engaging in disruptive behaviour, particularly troubling traders and travellers. These actions eventually led to his arrest and presentation before the Poonjar rulers. Upon learning of his son’s detention, the poojari is said to have approached the royal court to explain his son’s circumstances.

The narrative recounts that the court initially dismissed Poojari's claims. In response, the poojari is believed to have demonstrated his ritual power by sitting on the court floor on a folded blanket and summoning ants throughout the space. This act was interpreted by the court as evidence of extraordinary ability, prompting a reconsideration of their decision and the subsequent release of both father and son. At this point, the poojari is said to have requested formal recognition and authority for his son, who had previously been denied social standing. He asked for land within the Poonjar kingdom for his son to govern. The account states that this request was granted, along

with symbolic objects of authority, specifically a sword and a rope.

The narrative further describes an encounter on their return journey, during which Veeran Thevan and his father were attacked by members of the Urali community. Veeran Thevan is said to have killed the attackers using the sword he had been given. Following this incident, the land associated with the Urali community is believed to have come under Veeran Thevan's rule, with the community required to provide annual tributes. The account concludes by noting that Veeran Thevan and his father subsequently expanded their authority, incorporating the Mannan community into their emerging system of governance.

In contrast to Raman Rajamannan's account, V. R. Kumaran, a senior elder within the community, identifies Madurayanda Karanavar as the first king of the Mannan community. According to him, the Mannan system of governance did not originate in Poonjar but has its roots in Madurai. In this version of the narrative, the episode involving the summoning to the Poonjar court is attributed not to Veeran Thevan but to an individual named Ramanjan.

Kumaran recounts that Ramanjan was summoned by the ruling authority and asked to explain or share the Mannan system of governance. During this encounter, Ramanjan is said to have narrated the system while seated on a blanket folded seven times. By the time the narration was completed, the blanket was reportedly almost consumed by termites. This event is interpreted within the narrative as a demonstration of ritual power and authority, reinforcing the legitimacy of the Mannan system and its origins in Madurai rather than Poonjar.

The names of some of the very senior elders of the community are mentioned in many of the chants and verses in the Mannan prayers namely Madurayanda Karanavar, Madura Chokkan, Madura Veeran, Veeran Thevan, Veeran Ariyan, Thoshanidathan, Ashamporumban, Periyanayan, Chakkan. While some believe them to be the previous kings, some of the community members have differences of opinion. Some say they are only a list of great elders within the community and need not necessarily be of previous Kings. The chants also have different names as you move from family to family. Thus whether this list represents symbolic remembrance or actual history remains uncertain.

It is unclear if the system originated from Madurai itself. Some of the members believe the system of governance is as old and is practiced from Madurai itself, with the blessing of Madura Meenakshi goddess. Some believe the system came from the west, where they believed their great ancestors Panchampoolan and Periyanankan learnt many of their artforms and knowledge.

The Duty of the King:

The King's duties include calling meetings with Kaani (chieftain) from various hamlets to discuss welfare matters of people concerning health, death, and religious rituals. Based on the information gathered, the King instructs the ritual performers to perform the ritual of 'Nellu itt nokuka' to identify the causes of community issues and determine remedies through divine interpretation.

Selection Procedure:

Traditionally, after the passing of a King, the position is passed through the Marumakkathayam system of lineage. Members of the matrilineal family gather at the residence of the King, where some elders are said to enter a trance-like state known as Uranju Thulluka. During this state, divine will is believed to guide the choice of the next ruler. Once a successor is identified, the elected King is seated on the Koymakattil, a bamboo ritual platform, and is pressed down on it. This ritual, known as Rajavine Vaazhikkal, marks the selection and appointment of the new King in Mannan culture.

The previous King, Ariyan Rajamannan, passed away soon after taking charge of the community from Thevan Rajamannan. Ariyan was the elder nephew of Thevan Rajamannan and the brother of the current King, Raman Rajamannan. He could only serve the community as their king for a span of four years (2007-2011). His passing was often interpreted by the community as an omen and a punishment from the Gods, as he was not widely regarded as someone who followed the community's beliefs and systems with strict adherence. This created considerable concern within the community.

After extensive prayers and rituals, Raman Rajamannan, the younger nephew of Thevan Rajamannan, was elected as the next King, as the direct nephews of Ariyan were considered too young to assume the role. His selection was also regarded as a cautionary measure intended to address any issues believed to have emerged from the previous appointment.

A Dream by Raman Rajamannan

"I was working over the weekend in Thrissur, near the Vadakkumnathan Temple. The next morning received a call from my family informing me about the death. I relate this news to a dream I had th previous night.In the dream, I was lying on a sofa, similar to what one might see in a royal setting. guard came up to me and called out to me. When I turned to look at him, I woke up."

9 Kaani Committee

The Kaanis are referred to as senior executives to the Mannan governance, spiritual, and social matters. There are nine elderly Kaanis in total to assist the King. These elder 9 Kaanis belong to the Aayiramperumkuda region of Mannan administration. There are a total of 40+ kaani in total, each bestowed with specific settlement to oversee. It is believed that initially 9 Kaani were assigned to help the King in administration and later the number expanded as the Mannan community expanded and took up different settlements.

Origin of the Nine Kaani Story
After the time of Veeran Thevan, there is a story of Varattu Nayan, who is said to have ruled sever generations later. During his time, the system of rule is believed to have become more organised. large, centralised house called the valiya koora is described as being surrounded by farmlands, along with cattle and poultry. The community is said to have worked for the king and lived togethe with him as a collective within the valiya koora.
At some point during this period, ideas regarding the division of land and housing emerged, along with differences of opinion about styles of governance. According to the narrative, a faction of the community living under the king left the land overnight, abandoning the king.
The next morning, upon realising what had happened, the king is said to have been deeply saddened. As he remained at the valiya koora, nine members of the community arrived and discussed the situation with him. They persuaded the king to go in search of the people who had left. With their support, the king set out and eventually reached Vadakkudesham, towards Mannankandam (present-day Adimali).
Upon reaching this area, the king and his nine companions encountered a powerful individual who was believed to have control over wild animals. According to the stories, this person used elephant to plough the land. The king and his companions explained their situation to him. The man advised the nine companions to assist the king in governing the land and the people and bestowed names upon them.
The names given were:
(i) Naattumalan
(ii) Kadaadu Koombulan
(iii) Varakkooraliyan
(iv) Kattathopran
(v) Chadean Purambulaan
(vi) Kandamekidadan
(vii) Kuthiyathukolan
(viii) Muthuur
(ix) Kalkoonthal
He also named the king, who stood last, as Vanamchuvanna Varakkumalan, as the king is said to have prayed while looking up at the sky upon greeting him.

As in the case of four Mannan Moopanmar, the names and designation of nine Kaani also have differences within the community as we go from region to region, which is further elaborated in Annexure - IV.

Urala Samithi - The law and order enforcers

This group is responsible for maintaining law and order within the Mannan community. Their duties include settling disputes, enforcing community norms, and implementing punishments where necessary.

These officials are described as following a strict hierarchical system. While there are variations across narrations regarding the exact titles and identities of individuals, the accounts consistently indicate that decision-making authority rests with those at the top of the hierarchy, namely figures such as Ayiramkudiyanavan, Periyakudiyanavan, and Valiyulamthari. Towards the lower end of the hierarchy are officials responsible for implementing decisions at the ground level, including roles such as Ilayavattam, Thandakkaran, and Thannipatha. There are multiple narrations within the community concerning the precise order of these roles and the positions that exist between the upper and lower levels of authority. Details of these variations are provided in Annexure – IV.

Traditionally, individuals who disobeyed community laws were subject to punishment administered through these local governing systems. In more recent times, however, community members and leaders have increasingly adopted state law and order mechanisms in place of these customary practices.

Law and order, punishments, mudra vadi etc.

The community shared with us that they traditionally had their own system of law and order, maintained by officials within the community. Strict punishments were enforced to ensure adherence to these rules. In the early days, practices such as Ooruvilakku were present as part of this governance system.

We were informed about the Mudra Vadi, a stick of authority carried by the Mannan bureaucratic leaders. According to community members, the Mudra Vadi was held by both the king and the Kaani chieftains and was respected as equal to the person it represented. Messages and orders were often communicated in the presence of the Mudra Vadi, which served to identify the person of authority. The sticks were carried in order of authority by the law and order officials of the community. Community members explained that the Mudra Vadi is made of a cane stick, with

kunnikuru seeds affixed using bee wax from cherutheenicha.

A community elder explained to us that when a person carrying the Mudravadi appears, everyone is expected to rise immediately. Community leaders use this staff as a means of enforcing discipline, administering light punishment to those who fail to follow instructions. A local proverb encapsulates its intended purpose: “The stick used to strike should not break, and the snake which gets hit should not die.” In other words, the Mudrakol is not a weapon for harming, but a tool for delivering measured, symbolic correction. Elders recalled vivid memories of being lightly struck with the Mudrakol in earlier times, describing it as a formative element of community life.

Pathulamthaari Ulamthaarichikal

Pathulamthaari - Ulamtharichikal refers to the youth in the community, both males and females, who will be tasked with work during community events such as festivals, marriage, death etc.

Vaathi - Spiritual Intermediaries

There are four principal Vaathi within the Mannan governance structure. They function as intermediaries between the community and the gods, interpreting divine messages and conducting rituals, particularly during periods of hardship or calamity. The Vaathi are also described as possessing knowledge of magical spells, which they use to influence and control the environment. Historically, these figures held significant power within Mannan society and cultural life. However, during our travels across Mannan hamlets, we observed a disruption in this cultural continuum. Many senior elders who were considered knowledgeable have passed away without transmitting their knowledge through established lineages, and several Vaathi positions now appear to persist only as vestigial roles.

There are multiple viewpoints within the community regarding the naming of the four principal Vaathi as per the regions of the Mannan kingdom to which they are assigned. We encountered these varying narratives during the course of our research which are mentioned in Annexure – IV.

Story of Aanavaathi & Pullivaathi :

Due to increasing wild animal conflict, it is believed that a meeting was adjourned and a resolution was reached by the Mannan community. This was to instill a fifth vaathi, Adukkattu Nagamalean (sub clan) as Aanavathi and similarly, Kandamalath Paneekudi (sub clan) was given charge of bein Pulivaathi. They were assigned to protect the community from attacks predominantly from tigers and elephants as it was getting common. In case of deaths occurring due to such an attack, vaathi were assigned to conduct rituals and take care of the burial. This act is known as ‘kali adakkuka’ b the Vaathi.
From the research input by Biju Ponnayan.

Chapter 5: Belief System

“We pray to all gods, to the Maladaivangal as well as the Malayalam daivangal,” says Rajappan from Vazhamattam.

As the Mannan community settled across the 42 different hamlets, it is believed that each land was assigned a moorthi for protection. Thus each Mannan hamlet (kudi) has its own set of deities, linked to their family lineages, believed to protect the settlement. There are 42 such kuladaivangal (called moorthikal) and around 800 thevadhi 4 kadal thevadi , referring to the multitude of deities being avatars of many gods.

Who is a Thevadhi, Adiyan & Chavar

Thevadhi are understood within the Mannan community as different forms or avatars of gods. For example, Paatti Madhura Meenakshi of Madurai is regarded as a goddess, while Kanjiyar Paatti Muthiyama is considered her thevadhi, believed to reside at Kanjiyar and directly look after the local community. For a single deity, there may exist multiple thevadhi known by different names within the Mannan tradition.

For prominent thevadhi, there exists an adiyan, a specific sub-clan lineage within the Mannan community that is entrusted with the responsibility of worshipping the thevadhi and caring for their ritual needs. For instance, Periyathayyapan is recognised as a thevadhi in the Mannan community, whose adiyan is the Kunjikunakudi sub-clan, led by Ilayamoopan as a senior elder. Great-grand elders of the community who have passed away are regarded as having attained a status equivalent to thevadhi, possessing divine or supernatural powers. Within the community, such ancestral figures are referred to as Chavar.

We observed that many Mannan deities are now considered avatars of popular Hindu gods, including Vishnu, Ayyapan, and Mahadevan. We interpret this as a form of a cultural exchange occurring across generations, shaped by historical power structures and political centres. In the early era, when the community led a nomadic lifestyle, they worshiped their deities within the forest. Later, during periods of disruption and displacement, many small temples and places of worship were lost, and some were subsequently encroached upon by the dominant Malayali population that migrated to the region. Legal disputes are ongoing as the community attempts to reclaim what was once theirs.

Mannan & Different Faith
As we went in search of knowing the Mannan belief practices and system we met Ramani at Chinnaparakudi. Upon our inquiry she says there are many truths to the Mannan system. And quite hyping up and further conversations she states that everything started when man himself ate a forbidden apple.

During our fieldwork, it became clear that in many community hamlets, people have adopted Christianity alongside their indigenous beliefs. Interestingly, many individuals maintain an inclusive approach, integrating Mannan gods, beliefs, and truths alongside Hinduism and Christian faith.

From the outset of our fieldwork, we noticed that Mannan culture is closely intertwined with spiritual beliefs and magical practices, which are used to address everyday challenges such as conflicts with wild animals during farming, ensuring successful harvests, curing illnesses, and controlling weather phenomena including rain, sun, and lightning. This spiritual and magical framework continues to play a central role in the community's cultural life. One notable practice is the prayer to deities for controlling weather, with rituals intended to start or stop rain.

We also documented annual community festivals such as Kaalavootu, performed to seek forgiveness from the deities and express gratitude for their care. Similarly, Pongal and Meenoottu ceremonies reinforce the community's connection with nature and the divine. These practices reflect a holistic worldview in which farming, health, livelihood, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs are integrated.

However, both older members of the community and our observations of younger generations indicate that many practices and practitioners of Mannan faith are disappearing. Several elders who possessed knowledge of powerful magic and spells have passed away without transferring this cultural knowledge to younger generations. Our observations suggest that this loss is not a natural occurrence, but rather the result of cultural shifts stemming from repeated displacement and forced adaptation. In today's world, under the influence of a dominant culture and its pressures, the cultural significance of the community's identity and practices has diminished, leaving core cultural elements in a state of erosion. What remains are stories and memories of past practitioners, such as Aanavaathi, Pulivaathi, and Pullavashi, elders who were once believed to possess unique powers, control their space, and communicate with the deities.

The Mystical Land of the North

Through continuous interaction with the community, we repeatedly encountered references to the mystical northern lands (Vadakku). These regions are believed to be the source from which great-grand elders such as Panchampoolan and Periyanankan acquired extensive knowledge of Mannan culture, including Mannankoothu performances and ritual songs. Some senior elders also believe th the Mannan system of governance and social order originated from these northern regions.

Madurai

Madurai is described as another significant centre of power that strongly resonates within the community, particularly through the blessings of the goddess Madura Meenakshi. Several senior elders hold the view that the Mannan system of governance and the concept of truth itself originat in Madurai, under the direct guidance of the Madura Meenakshi goddess.

Ritual Practitioners of the Community

The main ritual practitioners of the Mannan community include Ponnum Poojari, Vaathi, Pullavashi, and Vichakkaran. Many of these positions now exist largely as vestiges, with limited functional roles. The passing of senior elders, which disrupted the transmission of knowledge, along with changes in cultural significance, has contributed to the diminishing prominence of these individuals in Mannan society.

Ponnum Poojari : Ponnum Poojari are individuals believed to maintain a divine connection with the gods. They are often observed entering trances, interpreting dreams, and predicting the likelihood of future events. Traditionally, there are two Ponnum Poojari assigned to the Mannan community: one at Ayiramperumkuda, where the king resides, and one at Thekku Desham (south). Although Ponnum Poojari are not directly involved in the governance of the community, they play an advisory role to the king, providing guidance on precautions to be taken. Through the Vaathi, these recommendations are translated into precautionary actions for the community at large.

Vaathi : Like we mentioned in the previous chapter, Vaathi are powerful people who are well versed with magic spells who communicate with the deities and help the community by protecting them from diseases and other undesired circumstances.

Pullavashi: Pullavashi are also responsible for the protection of the community; however, unlike the Vaathi, their role operates on a smaller scale. They are typically assigned to oversee and safeguard smaller divisions of land, focusing on localized areas rather than the broader community.

Vichakkaran : Vichakkaran are believed to practice magic and use their powers to heal people in the community. They are said to cure ailments by giving patients water that has been enchanted with spells.

The practise of Kodangi

Kodangi is a practice within the Mannan community used for problem solving after divine predictio and premonition in Mannan belief. Based on guidance from a Vaathi or Ponnum Poojari, certain premonitions are made to identify potential issues or crises within the community. Precautionary measures are implemented according to the readings obtained through Kodangi.
The process involves using paddy grains on a wooden platform to derive the readings. These readings often indicate which deities are displeased and are considered responsible for the issue. Consequently, the precautionary measures focus on appeasing the deity identified in the reading. Such measures may include acts like hanging prayer bangles at specific locations or nailing screws as part of ritual observances. The issue is considered resolved once these precautionary actions have been properly performed.

Festivals

During the initial phase of our research, we were invited to attend the community's annual festival. Like many other communities, the Mannan people celebrate an annual festival in which they offer prayers and tributes to their deities as a mark of gratitude. This festival, called Kalavoottu, is said to hold deep cultural significance and is closely associated with the traditional ways of life of the community in earlier times. The festival occurs during the harvest season, typically between January and April, and is historically linked to other major life events such as marriages and funeral rites.

In addition to Kalavoottu, the community observes several smaller festivals around the same period, including celebrations of Pongal. The Meenoottu ritual is also performed in accordance with Kalavoottu and its associated observances, generally before the arrival of the monsoon.

During the monsoon season, the community's activities are comparatively subdued, with limited celebrations. Rituals performed during this time primarily focus on prayers to control rainfall. Minor rituals are said to be carried out after the monsoon period, and preparations for the next Kalavoottu gradually begin as the northeast monsoon recedes and community life becomes more active.

Kalavoottu

The name Kalavoottu comes from the words Kaalam, which refers to a year or season, and Oottu, which means feast. It denotes an annual ritual feast offered to the deities. Through this event, the community gives thanks for the past year and seeks divine support for the future. It also serves as a moment to recognize the relationship between the people, their land, and their gods.

The origins of the festival are closely connected to the environment. In earlier times, the Mannan community cleared forest areas for cultivation, and Kalavoottu functioned as a way to ask forgiveness from the deities for any damage caused to nature. This practice helped the community maintain a sense of balance with the environment and acknowledge their reliance on the land.

Traditionally, Kalavoottu lasted seven days and included a range of cultural activities, ritual practices, and artistic expressions. A central feature was Mannan Koothu, a folk performance that narrates the story of Kannaki and Kovalan through songs and staged storytelling presented over the course of the week. Today, the festival is observed as a one day event due to changes in lifestyle, but it continues to be viewed as an important expression of devotion and cultural identity. Kalaavoottu is held individually in every Mannan hamlet and finally at Kovilmala.

Before the festival begins, the community observes Payel Iruthal, a seven day mourning period described earlier. This period is dedicated to remembering those who have passed away and provides a space for collective reflection. It prepares the community for the activities that follow.

In the past, marriages within the community were often held during Kalavoottu under the supervision of the tribal chieftain known as Kaani. This practice has largely changed in modern times.

In a period of rapid social change, Kalavoottu remains a significant reminder of the community's heritage, its ancestral connections, and the importance of gathering in a shared spirit of gratitude.

Scan the QR code to watch the Earthlore documentary on Mannan Kalavoottu festival.

Meenoottu: Annual Ritual of the Mannan Community

Meenoottu is an annual ritual performed by the Mannan community to seek protection from diseases and ensure the general welfare of the community. Traditionally observed three days after Kalayoottu at Kovilmala, it was once practiced across multiple regions aligned with the sub-kingdoms of the Mannan community. Today, it continues primarily at Kovilmala and Kumily.

The night before Meenoottu, the community gathers at the Ayyapankovil for prayers known as attu mukund vekuka, honoring deities and departed elders. This is followed by a night-long performance of Mannan Koothu, which continues until the next morning.

On the day of Meenoottu, elders and ritual leaders proceed to the riverbank at Ayyapankovil to offer prasadam, a mixture of rice, jaggery, and coconut, to the fishes. During this event, Vayathuka, a form of Mannan prayer, is sung. A special fish, called Kuyil in the Mannan language (and Katti in Malayalam), is believed to consume the offerings. Distinctive markings on the fish's body, single, double, or triple lines, represent the hierarchy of Mannan community leaders.

Elders recall that initially only a single fish appeared, but later, upon request, a school of fishes joined. The fishes are ritually fed three times: first for the King and his family, then for other community leaders, and finally for the entire community. According to the Ilayaraja, when the special fish circles in front of the King, the King may ask questions about impending diseases or deaths, with the fish signaling answers through movements of its gills and fins.

Following the river ritual, the community visits the nearby Ayyapan temple (Ayyapankovil) to offer prayers to Lord Ayyapan, known locally as Periyathu Ayyapan. Coconut-breaking rituals are performed for divine predictions before continuing with prayers.

The ceremony concludes with a communal feast, followed by the final ritual, Kooshaduka, at the King's residence. The King blesses the gathered community clan by clan, sprinkles divine water for protection, and distributes a small portion of ritual rice to each individual, to be cooked with food at home.

Modern changes have introduced challenges to Meenoottu. Construction of check dams has disrupted the river flow, and unsustainable fishing practices, such as the use of crackers by outsiders, have further interfered with the ritual, making it increasingly difficult to maintain the traditional connection with the fishes and divine presence.

The Gods have distanced

“We need to live together and strongly follow our customs and beliefs. Only then will our deities ar
our call,” says Balan Chakkan, Ilayalarajavu of Kovilmala. He believes that the gods have distanced
themselves as a result of changes in the Mannan way of life.
Similar beliefs are reflected in stories about increasing conflicts with wild animals. In earlier times,
said that elephants would heed the words of the Mannan people. However, the community believes
this harmony was lost due to external influences and cultural changes. Today, elephants are believ
not to respond to the people because the Mannan language is no longer spoken properly within the
community.

Scan the QR code to watch the Earthlore documentary on Meenoottu ritual.

Pongal Festival in the Mannan Community

Pongal is one of the major festivals celebrated by the Mannan community, alongside Kalayoottu. The festival involves prayers and offerings to the deities of each region of the community settlements, collectively referred to as the 42 adiyan. Pongal is observed once a year at designated temples across the settlements, with dates scheduled by community elders in consultation with the families responsible for these temples.

On the eve of Pongal, community members gather at the local deity temple to prepare for the festival. This includes cleaning the temple premises and arranging the deities. Mannan Koothu is performed overnight to entertain and please both the gathered community and the deities, in a practice known as aattupattu visheshangal.

On the day of Pongal, prayers are offered for each family sub-clan in a ceremony called Kooshaduka to ensure good fortune for the year ahead. This involves the act of thadi kuthuka, where leaves of the koova plant are arranged to represent the 42 adiyan and their clan deities, and payasam prepared in a Pongal pot is placed on these leaves.

During the ceremony, community leaders such as the King (Rajamannan) call out each clan deity, offering prayers and spells in the Mannan language. Other leaders, including the Pullavasi, Vaathi, and Kaanikkar, assist in facilitating the rituals.

At the conclusion of the Kooshaduka, families observe rituals according to their mura system. Designated families sprinkle water on one another in a symbolic gesture tied to their clan relationships, marking the end of the festival. For example, during prayers for the Oorukaran sub-clan, designated families of Rajakkadan Ailavan sprinkle water on them. These rituals are celebratory, filled with laughter and communal joy.

The festival concludes as community members return to their respective hamlets, vowing to reconvene the following year, maintaining a cycle of tradition, devotion, and togetherness.

Scan the QR code to watch the Earthlore documentary on Mannan Pongal celebration.

List of Documentaries

Since initiating our collaboration with the Mannan tribal community of Idukki, we have produced a compelling series of documentaries on the cultural heritage of these two communities. These films are a key component of our ongoing Earthlore Documentation Project, supported by the Samāgata Foundation.

Here are the documentaries we have published to date:

1. **MANNAN Tribe: The Last Forest Kingdom of Kerala | Part 1: The Origin**

This video traces the origins of the Mannan tribe, a unique community that has preserved its identity in the forests of Kerala's Western Ghats. We explore different historical narratives about their migration, the establishment of their king-led governance, and the rituals and art forms that define their culture. Watch to understand a way of life shaped by the forest, tradition, and resilience. Stay tuned for the next parts of this series.

2. **Payayil Iruthal: A Ritual of Grief, Memory, and Healing in the Mannan Community**

Among the many rich and diverse traditions of Mannan community of Kerala, Payayil Iruthal (also Payel Iruthal) stands out as a deeply humane and spiritually resonant mourning ritual. This unique practice honours the memory of a deceased spouse and provides the surviving partner a sacred space for remembrance, grief, and eventual healing.

3. **Kalaavoottu: Annual Festival of Dance, Tribute & Atonement**

Kalaavoottu (Kalayoottu), the annual festival of the Mannan tribal community, is a vibrant gathering marked by dance, music and rituals. The community comes together to offer prayers and annual tributes to their Gods, perform the traditional dance Mannan Koothu and seeks forgiveness & blessings for the year ahead. The celebrations are preceded by a solemn seven-day mourning ritual, Payel Iruthal, which paves the way for the festivities by fostering healing and togetherness through the act of honouring the memories of loved ones they lost.

4. **Mannan Koothu : The Living Tradition of a Tribal Dance in Kerala**

Among the Mannan tribal community of Kerala, a rich cultural tradition continues to beat to the rhythms of drums and the chants of ancient tales. This is *Mannan Koothu*, a traditional dance-drama that weaves storytelling, music, and ritual into a unique form of cultural expression. At its heart lies the retelling of the legendary Kannaki - Kovalan saga, a story rooted in Tamil Sangam literature but uniquely adapted by the Mannan people into their own version of the epic.

5. **Meenoottu: Fish, Prophecy & The Mannan King**

A centuries-old Mannan ritual of prayer, prophecy, and community, Meenoottu reminds us of a world where people once listened closely to rivers, fish, and the stories carried in their flow. This episode offers a window into Meenoottu, where culture, nature, and beliefs come together shaped by ancestral wisdom and collective prayer. Witness a ritual that continues to hold a community together—even as time and change test its resilience.

6. **Pongal : Celebrating the Mannan Deities**

Pongal is a significant annual festival of the Mannan community in Kerala, centred around offerings and prayers made to honour the regional deities of the community. Held at sacred sites across their settlements, Pongal is a time when the community comes together to celebrate their ancestral social bond and their system of co-dependence. This episode explores the living tradition of Pongal, examining its cultural roots and celebrations.

Mannankoothu : Performance and Songs

Mannan Koothu is a traditional ritualistic dance performance of the Mannan tribal community in Kerala, deeply rooted in the epic tale of Kannaki and Kovalan. More than a performance, it is a living expression of the community’s collective memory, spiritual beliefs, and oral storytelling practices. Passed down through generations, Mannan Koothu blends dramatic narration, symbolic costumes, music and its rhythm.

Mannan-Koothu is a traditional cultural dance performance of the Mannan community. The performance combines expressive movements with Mannan-Koothu songs, accompanied by traditional instruments and accessories.

The stories enacted in Mannan-Koothu are based on the legendary tale of Kannaki and Kovalan. However, the Mannan community’s version of the narrative shows slight variations from the Silappathikaram, the classic Tamil Sangam epic from which the story originates. Through rhythmic songs, vibrant dance, and symbolic gestures, the Mannan people preserve and retell this ancient story in their own distinct cultural form.

In the earlier days, the community performed Mannan-Koothu every week under the guidance of the Kaani or chieftain within their hamlets. It was an important part of their social and cultural life, bringing the community together through music and storytelling. Today, Mannan-Koothu is performed mainly during annual festivals such as Kaalayootu and Pongal, or on special occasions, including the passing of prominent community members.

Mythological Origin of Mannankoothu

According to the beliefs of the Mannan community, Mannan-Koothu was founded by two ancestral brothers, Panchampoolan and Periyanankan. Guided by Poolappan Poolan Kaani, the brothers approached two sisters, Valuvakotha and Valuvachakki, who were known for their mastery of the art of Koothu. Many had tried to learn from the sisters before but had failed. The sisters agreed to teach the brothers, but with a condition — only one could be taught the art directly. As a result, the elder brother, Panchampoolan, learned within the gurukulam, while Periyanankan learned the craft from outside.

After the training, the sisters gave the brothers a test. They were asked to demonstrate their learning by causing a tree to wilt and burn. Panchampoolan could wilt the tree, but Periyanankan, with his focused gaze, set it ablaze. Impressed by their devotion and skill, the sisters blessed them both.

The brothers later returned to their hamlets and shared their knowledge with their people. It is believed that they formed the rhythm, structure, and style of Mannan-Koothu, passing it down through generations of the Mannan community.

Costume and Makeup in Mannankoothu

Mannan-Koothu features different types of characters, including male, female, and comedian roles. Traditionally, only men performed in the Koothu, with male performers also taking on female roles. In recent times, however, this has begun to change — elderly women and young girls have started participating, marking a shift in tradition and helping to revive this age-old art form.

The male and female characters perform rhythmic dances to Koothu songs that narrate the story of Kannaki and Kovalan. The comedian character keeps the audience engaged throughout the night, as the performance often begins after dusk and continues until morning.

In earlier times, makeup was done using ash, soot, and sandalwood paste. Costumes were made from materials like tree bark and a paste prepared from wild arayani. Today, performers wear modern attire such as sarees, churidars, dhotis, and shirts, blending traditional themes with contemporary expressions.

Mannankoothu Songs and Structure

The Mannan community believes that there are about eighty-five Koothu songs in existence. These songs have been passed down through generations as part of an oral tradition. They narrate the story of Kannaki and Kovalan — from their birth to Kannaki's arrival in Kerala. While the songs are inspired by the Silappathikaram epic, the Mannan version introduces its own variations in narrative and detail.

In earlier times, Mannan-Koothu was performed over seven days, with each stage presenting a portion of the Kannaki–Kovalan story. Today, the performance is usually limited to a single night due to changes in lifestyle and livelihood patterns.

The first three songs, known as Daiva Pattukal (divine songs), are particularly significant. They express the community's reverence for the gods, ancestors, and the king, and are sung to seek permission and blessings before the performance begins. These songs are usually performed separately in a corner near the main arena.

The performance concludes with the Mangalam song. During this final act, a bowl of water is placed at the centre of the arena; it is later sprinkled around the space to mark the ritual end of the Koothu.

Traditionally, Mannan-Koothu included a blend of songs, verses, and storytelling. However, this older structure is now fading, with most performances featuring only the songs. Some elders in the community still remember the complete version and share their knowledge to preserve it.

Folk songs called Muripaattukal were once interwoven with the Koothu to depict scenes from everyday life — such as farming in the forest, interpersonal relationships, or lullabies. These songs also provided rest intervals for the lead singers. In recent times, Malayalam songs are often used in place of Muripaattukal, as many traditional tunes have been lost.

Efforts are now being made to revive the older form of Mannan-Koothu and its traditional songs. Mani from Chinnapara notes that younger members of the community are learning the ancient methods, working to bring back the authentic rhythm and essence of their cultural heritage.

MANNAN KOOTHU SONGS SAMPLE :

Sl No.	Name of the Song	Type of the Song	Description	Link to the Archive
1	Nalla Ennoorunthan Thevarkalellam	Daiva Paattu	Mannan Koothu performed to the prayer song ‘Nalla Ennoorunthan Thevarkalellam’, traditionally sung in the beginning of the Mannan Koothu performance, offering respect to the 800 Mannan deities of the land and seeking their blessings. It is performed before the enactment of the Kannaki - Kovilan segment of the Koothu.	

2	Nammal Arare Pere Cholli Aaduvene	Daiva Paattu	Adapted version of Mannan Koothu performed to the prayer song ‘Nammal Arare Pere Cholli Aaduvene’ This song is sung as a tribute to the ancestral founders of the Mannankoothu, Panchanpoolan and Periyanankan, according to Mannan belief. They are praised in the song as a way of seeking their blessings.	
3	Oh Raja Raja Chola Raja	Daiva Paattu	Mannan Koothu performed to the prayer song ‘Oh Raja Raja Chola Raja’, also sung at the beginning of a Mannan Koothu performance, paying tribute to the King and the great elders of the community.	

4	Nalla Rottoram Veettukari	Kaattu Paattu	Mannan Koothu performed to the Muripaattu song ‘Nalla Rottoram Veettukari’. The song describes a rural woman and admires her colorful saree, graceful walk and adornments.	
5	Cholam Vithakkapona Muthamma	Krishi Paattu	Mannan Koothu performed to the folksong ‘Cholam Vithakkapona Muthamma’.‘ The song describes an elderly woman, Muthamma, and her actions in cultivating crops like corn, ragi, and millets such as sowing the seeds, cutting the weed in the process.	
6	Inji Manji Valinadandho Vanjikodiye Paaru	Idavela Paattu, Kaattu Paattu	Mannan Koothu performed to the folksong ‘Inji Manji Valinadandho’, a song that describes the natural landscape, including rocky terrain, dense forests, and wild animals.	

7	Chandramathipin en Kuyilo	Kannaki Kovalan Song	Mannan Koothu performed to the Kannaki - Kovalan song ‘Chandramathipin en Kuyilo’ The song is a dialogue with the moon, asking it to light up the forest with moonlight as Kannaki and Kovilan walk through it.	
8	Chinnankara Vanthath Ennen Karayo	Kaattu Paattu (Kotharai Paattu) Prema Song), Idavela Song	Mannan Koothu performed to the folk song ‘Chinnankara Vanthath Ennen Karayo’, a song describing the land praising the land of the king.	
9	Nalle Kallu Mele Makale Eera Venda	Kannaki Kovalan Song	Mannan Koothu performed to the Kannaki-Kovilan song ‘Nalle Kallu Mele Makane Eera Venda’, in which the young Kovilan is advised to be careful and cautious while playing in the forest, climbing rocks, or scaling trees	

10	Oh Raja Raja Chola Raja	Daiva Paattu	Adapted version of Mannan Koothu performed to the prayer song ‘Oh Raja Raja Chola Raja’, also sung at the beginning of a Mannan Koothu performance, paying tribute to the King and the great elders of the community.	
11	Ayya Varaaru Theppethu Madura Vittei	Kannaki Kovalan Song	Adapted version of Mannan koothu being performed to the song ‘Ayya Varaaru Theppethu Madura Vittei’. This is a hunting related song, where the preparations, journey and sights during the hunting are explained through the lyrics.	

12	Kalludachu Kinarum Ketti	Pani Song	Adapted version of Mannan koothu being performed to the song ‘Kalludach Kinarum Ketti’. This song is referred to as ‘pani paattu’, where daily life activities are sung. In this song, tasks related to digging a well, fencing the yard, and caring for an infant are described.	
13	Nalla Chandena Mamaram Allellallo, Chami Puranthayidam Allelallo	Kannaki Kovalan Song	Adapted version of Mannan koothu being performed to the song ‘Nalla Chandena Mamaram Allellallo’. This is one of the Kannaki - Kovalan songs of the Mannankoothu. Here in this song, a pleasant spring season is described within the lyrics, reflecting the happy phase in the life of Kannaki.	

14	Periyath Thanniyile Vadivela, Penkalellam Neeraduthe Vadivela	Murugan Song	Adapted version of Mannan koothu being performed to the song ‘Periyath Thanniyile Vadivela’. The song is used to describe a woman in her daily routine,taking bath, brooming, getting ready in a playful banter.	
15	Nalla Chathiyumilleyo Chanangalomilla	Kannaki Kovalan Song	Adapted version of Mannan koothu being performed to the song ‘Nalla Chathiyumilleyo Chanangalomilla’. The song describes the situation where Pandya King orders to execute Kovalan and Kovalan’s loneliness is reflected in the song.	
16	Mangalam Paattu	Mangalam Song	Mannan Koothu performed to the Mangalam song, as the concluding act in the arc of Mannan Koothu.	

Musical Instruments in Mannankoothu

Three main musical instruments or accessories are integral to Mannan-Koothu:
(i) Mathalam
(ii) Chilanka
(iii) Ilathalam

The instrumentalists sit on a wooden platform known as benchikol or kol, which serves as their stage. The Mathalam player is seated in the front row, followed by the lead singer and other instrumentalists, with the chorus singers and learners forming the final line. This arrangement reflects both the hierarchy and the collaborative nature of the performance.

Mathalam : The Mathalam is a percussion drum traditionally crafted from the wood of the kumbil tree (Gmelina arborea) and fitted with the skin of the udumb (monitor lizard, Varanus bengalensis). As hunting monitor lizards is now prohibited, goat skin is used instead. Due to the scarcity of mature kumbil trees — which are mostly found deep in the forest — jackfruit wood is now often used as an alternative.

Many families continue to use Mathalams made by their ancestors, replacing only the drum skin when necessary. The making of a Mathalam is considered sacred and involves a ritual performed by the Moorikaru, a particular sub-group within the community. This ritual includes prayers and the preparation of a dish called Ada, traditionally made from ragi millet, though wheat is also used today.

The Mathalam and other instruments hold divine significance for the community. Before entering the Mannan-Koothu arena, performers bow before the Mathalam to seek its blessings, followed by prayers to the Goddess of the Earth (Bhoomi Devi). These acts of reverence reflect the community’s deep spiritual connection to their art form and its sacred instruments.

Chilanka : The Chilanka is a jingling ornament tied around the dancers’ ankles, producing rhythmic sounds that enhance the tempo of the performance. Each step of the dancer adds to the

musical flow of the Koothu, blending movement and sound. Symbolically, the Chilanka represents Kannaki’s chilambu (anklet) from the Kannaki–Kovalan tale, connecting the performance to its mythological roots.

Ilathalam / Chalara : The Ilathalam, also known as Chalara, is a small metallic percussion instrument resembling miniature cymbals. It is used to create sharp, distinctive chimes that mark rhythm and transitions in the Koothu songs. The clear ringing of the Ilathalam complements the deeper tones of the Mathalam, adding texture and balance to the overall musical ensemble.

Women in Koothu

Traditionally, women of the Mannan community did not perform Mannan Koothu. One major reason for this restriction is the presence of Ayyappa worship and related rituals within the performance, which prohibit participation by menstruating women. Elderly women, however, were sometimes allowed to take part. Another reason lies in the belief that the Koothu arena is protected by magical spells cast by learned elders. Women generally avoided entering these spaces, fearing potential repercussions from these protective rituals.

In recent times, these restrictions have become more flexible. As the number of elders skilled in such ritual magic has declined, the sense of fear has lessened. Some teenage girls have started showing interest in Koothu performances, though they usually refrain from participating during ritualistic occasions. While a few elders express concern about possible unfavorable outcomes, many within the community welcome these efforts as a positive step towards the revival and continuation of Mannankoothu.

Tourism and Koothu

MannanKoothu has found a new platform through tourism initiatives in Kumily, supported by the Department of Forest and Wildlife under the Eco-Development Committee (EDC) scheme. Daily performances are held at the Vanashree Auditorium in Kumily. Earlier, the program also included visits to tribal hamlets and a museum experience, but at present, only the performance continues as an active component.

The integration of Koothu into tourism began as a revival effort by the Mannan community at their Kumily settlement. For nearly fifty years, the community faced challenges in preserving their cultural practices. Between 1998 and 2000, a conscious effort was made to learn, document, and revive Koothu. In 2009, the community established their own cultural centre at Kumily, marking a significant step in this revival journey.

The community’s earlier performances revealed that the traditional, unstructured version of Koothu struggled to hold audience attention. This led to discussions on adapting Koothu for modern viewers while preserving its essence. Drawing inspiration from earlier special performances led by Thevan Rajamannan, visual and rhythmic elements were refined for stage appeal. Costumes were created using bark from the sacred Incha Kodi tree, and necklaces were made from Badraksham, another revered tree. Rhythmic dance steps were added to the narrative songs, giving the performance a more structured and engaging form.

Following the establishment of the EDC programs, Koothu performances moved from the community’s own cultural space to the Forest Department’s cultural centre. To better suit tourism contexts, the duration was shortened to about one hour, and audience interaction was added by inviting guests on stage.

Biju, a community member, expresses hope that the traditional version of Koothu will one day find equal recognition in tourism. At the same time, he acknowledges the success of the Kumily model as a promising example of how Mannan-Koothu can adapt, sustain itself, and continue to represent the cultural identity of the Mannan community.

Mannan Festivals

Mannan Festivals

Kalavoottu

The name Kalavoottu is derived from the words Kaalam (meaning a year or season) and Oottu (meaning feast), it symbolizes an annual ritual feast dedicated to the deities. Through this feast, the community offers thanks for the blessings received over the past year and seeks divine grace for the future. It’s a moment to pause and acknowledge the bond between the people, their land, and their gods.

The festival’s roots are deeply tied to the land. In earlier times, the Mannan people cleared forest areas for cultivation, and Kalavoottu served as a way to seek forgiveness from the gods for any harm done to nature. It was their way of maintaining harmony with the environment and recognizing their dependence on the land’s bounty.

Traditionally, Kalavoottu was a seven-day celebration brimmed with cultural expressions, from symbolic rituals to the community’s unique art forms. One of the highlights was Mannan Koothu, a folk performance that tells the tragic yet powerful tale of Kannaki and Kovalan through soulful songs and storytelling, unfolding their story stage by stage over the week. Today, Kalavoottu has been condensed into a one-day affair, a reflection of changing times and lifestyles. Yet, even in its shorter form, it retains its essence — a heartfelt tribute to the gods, a celebration of life, and a reaffirmation of the community’s cultural identity.

Before the festivities begin, the community observes Payel Iruthal — a solemn seven-day mourning ritual. This quiet, reflective period honours the memories of those who have passed, creating space for healing and togetherness. It’s this emotional and spiritual cleansing that paves the way for the vibrant celebration that follows.

In the past, marriages within the community used to happen during the period Kalavootu, under the guidance of tribal chieftain called ‘Kaani’. Modern life has altered this custom.

In a world that’s rapidly moving forward, festivals like Kalavoottu are a beautiful reminder of the importance of remembering our roots, honoring our ancestors, and coming together in gratitude and joy.

Mannan Festivals

Payayil Iruthal: Mourning Ritual of the Mannan Community

Payayil Iruthal (also called Payel Iruthal) is a traditional mourning ritual observed by the Mannan community of Kerala. It is performed by the spouse of a deceased individual to honour their memory, traditionally for three consecutive years. The ritual involves a period of intense grieving, remembrance, and gradual healing.

During the ritual, the spouse lays out a mat (payayil) along with designated pooja items arranged in a prescribed manner. Food items such as rice, curry, and coffee are placed to invite the spirit of the deceased, and sometimes personal items like a betel pack are included, depending on the habits of the departed. A mat is reserved specifically for the spirit, which is believed to inhabit it for the duration of seven days each year.

The spouse remains seated on this mat for seven continuous days, abstaining from all work. Family members provide food, and the spouse is allowed only short walks within the house and toilet breaks. Both male and female spouses participate, following gender-specific observances: men refrain from cutting hair or shaving, while women remove ornaments such as earrings and necklaces during the ritual.

Community elders, including the Kaanikkaran, Pullavashi, or Ilayaraja, oversee the ritual, ensuring it is conducted according to tradition. They guide the spouse and relatives regarding their responsibilities.

After the seven days, the elders revisit the household to formally conclude the ritual. The mat is shaken three times to symbolically remove the spirit, and the spouse, accompanied by in-laws, visits the deceased’s graveyard for further prayers. Here, they cry briefly, offering prayers to ensure that the spirit transitions to the afterlife and only returns when called for protection or guidance.

The ritual concludes with a ceremonial bath, after which family members, typically the sister-in-law, assist the spouse in dressing, adorning her with flowers, jewelry, and other ornaments to mark

her return to daily life.

This deeply humane practice culminates in Kalavvoottu, a vibrant festival celebrating life, illustrating how sorrow is transformed into healing through ritual and tradition.

Mannan Festivals

Meenoottu: Annual Ritual of the Mannan Community

Meenoottu is an annual ritual performed by the Mannan community to seek protection from diseases and ensure the general welfare of the community. Traditionally observed three days after Kalayoottu at Kovilmala, it was once practiced across multiple regions aligned with the sub-kingdoms of the Mannan community. Today, it continues primarily at Kovilmala and Kumily.

The night before Meenoottu, the community gathers at the Ayyapankovil for prayers known as attu mukund vekuka, honoring deities and departed elders. This is followed by a night-long performance of Mannan Koothu, which continues until the next morning.

On the day of Meenoottu, elders and ritual leaders proceed to the riverbank at Ayyapankovil to offer prasadam—a mixture of rice, jaggery, and coconut—to the fishes. During this event, Vayathuka, a form of Mannan prayer, is sung. A special fish, called Kuyil in the Mannan language (and Katti in Malayalam), is believed to consume the offerings. Distinctive markings on the fish's body—single, double, or triple lines—represent the hierarchy of Mannan community leaders.

Elders recall that initially only a single fish appeared, but later, upon request, a school of fishes joined. The fishes are ritually fed three times: first for the King and his family, then for other community leaders, and finally for the entire community. According to the Ilayaraja, when the special fish circles in front of the King, the King may ask questions about impending diseases or deaths, with the fish signaling answers through movements of its gills and fins.

Following the river ritual, the community visits the nearby Ayyapan temple (Ayyapankovil) to offer prayers to Lord Ayyapan, known locally as Periyathu Ayyapan. Coconut-breaking rituals are performed for divine predictions before continuing with prayers.

The ceremony concludes with a communal feast, followed by the final ritual, Kooshaduka, at the King's residence. The King blesses the gathered community clan by clan, sprinkles divine water for protection, and distributes a small portion of ritual rice to each individual, to be cooked with food at home.

Modern changes have introduced challenges to Meenoottu. Construction of check dams has disrupted the river flow, and unsustainable fishing practices, such as the use of crackers by outsiders, have further interfered with the ritual, making it increasingly difficult to maintain the traditional connection with the fishes and divine presence.

Pongal Festival in the Mannan Community

Pongal is one of the major festivals celebrated by the Mannan community, alongside Kalayoottu. The festival involves prayers and offerings to the deities of each region of the community settlements, collectively referred to as the 42 adiyan. Pongal is observed once a year at designated temples across the settlements, with dates scheduled by community elders in consultation with the families responsible for these temples.

On the eve of Pongal, community members gather at the local deity temple to prepare for the festival. This includes cleaning the temple premises and arranging the deities. Mannan Koothu is performed overnight to entertain and please both the gathered community and the deities, in a practice known as aattupattu visheshangal.

On the day of Pongal, prayers are offered for each family sub-clan in a ceremony called Kooshaduka to ensure good fortune for the year ahead. This involves the act of thadi kuthuka, where leaves of the koova plant are arranged to represent the 42 adiyan and their clan deities, and payasam prepared in a Pongal pot is placed on these leaves.

During the ceremony, community leaders such as the King (Rajamannan) call out each clan deity, offering prayers and spells in the Mannan language. Other leaders, including the Pullavasi, Vaathi, and Kaanikkar, assist in facilitating the rituals.

At the conclusion of the Kooshaduka, families observe rituals according to their mura system. Designated families sprinkle water on one another in a symbolic gesture tied to their clan relationships, marking the end of the festival. For example, during prayers for the Oorukaran sub-clan, designated families of Rajakkadan Ailavan sprinkle water on them. These rituals are celebratory, filled with laughter and communal joy.

The festival concludes as community members return to their respective hamlets, vowing to reconvene the following year, maintaining a cycle of tradition, devotion, and togetherness.

A Unique Governance System

The governance system of the Mannan community is unique, traditional, and deeply rooted in its cultural and spiritual beliefs. The King is the head of the community and presides over all major decisions, supported by a structured hierarchy of leaders and advisors. The administrative headquarters of the Mannan community is known as Ayiramperumkuda, located at Kovilmala in Idukki District. In the Mannan language, the King is referred to as Varakku Malan or Valiya Moopan.

The governing structure includes the following:

- 4 Vaathi (spiritual intermediaries)
- 4 Mannan (regional heads)
- 9 Kaani (advisors to the King)
- 10 Kulamthaari and 10 Kulamthaarichi (law and order officials — male and female respectively)

4 Mannan and Regional Divisions

This system of governance — combining kingship, councils, law enforcement, and divine intermediaries — reflects a holistic form of leadership that intertwines administration, spirituality, and community welfare, sustaining the Mannan people’s cultural identity across generations.

The community’s traditional territory is divided into four main regions, each headed by a Moopan of equal authority. These regions are defined based on geographical directions

According to the current Mannan King, even though there are 4 kingdoms based on geography, there exist 3 kingdoms based on the governance structure of the community. They are :

(1) Thekkodu Desham (Kumali Side) Kottakathalayk Melodu	(2) Ayiram Perumkuda (Centre Region) Nadukkada	(3) Vadakkudu Desham (Adimali Side) Malanaatu Mala

Regions	Boundaries	Leader/Mooopan
South (Thekku)	Kumily Area	Chinthirandi Mooopan
North (Vadakku)	Thodupuzha Area	Manappadan Mooopan

East (Kizhakku)	Udumbanchola Area	Thalamb ila Moopan
West (Padinjaru)	Ernakulam / Trissur Area	Kenjila Maniyaran Moopan

SooryaPathbhanabhan remembers the 4 moopans as : (i) Vadakkooru Malan (ii) Thekkidam Malan (iii) Varakkumalan and (iv) Vettumthera

Table: Various sub-kingdoms and leaders associated

Regions	Boundaries	Leader/Moopan
South (Thekku)	Kumily Area	Chinthirandi Moopan
North (Vadakku)	Thodupuzha Area	Adinaattu Moopan

East (Kizhakku)	Udumbanchola Area	Thalambila Moopan
West (Padinjaru)	Ernakulam / Trissur Area	Mannappadan Moopan

According to the research efforts of Biju Ponnayan, a Mannan community member from Kumily, there exists 4 sub Kingdoms for the Mannan community. They are :

Ayiram Perumkuda	Tholayiram Paravam	Chenthanattumala	Kottakkathalayk Melode

A Unique Governance System

The King (Valiyamoopan / Varakkumalan)

The elders narrate that the four Moopans, who were initially equal in power, once met at Thollayiraparavi and collectively decided to crown one among them, Varakkumalan, as the King. This was to ensure unity and easier coordination, as frequent travel between regions was difficult in the olden days.

The King serves as the supreme head and guardian of the Mannan community, overseeing welfare, administration, and ritual matters. The title passes through a matrilineal succession system in accordance with the community’s customs. Alongside the King, there is an Ilaya Moopan (younger chief) or Ilaya Rajavu, who assists in governance.

Recent Lineage of Kings (as per documented records):

Madurayanda Karanavar Madura Chokkan Madura Veeran Veeran Thevan Veeran Ariyan Thoshanidathan Ashamporumban Periyanayan Chakkan	Listed from the discussion from elders. But most of the names are that of gods and deities rather than actual persons? The current King does not support the data. The boo

Nayan Rajamannan	11th King
Thevan Rajamannan	12th King
Ariyan Rajamannan	13th King
Raman Rajamannan	Recent King. 14th King

The Duty of the King: The King’s duties include calling meetings with Kaanikkar from various hamlets to discuss matters concerning health, death, and religious rituals. Based on the information gathered, the King instructs the ritual performers to perform the ritual of Nellu itt nokuka to identify the causes of community issues and determine remedies through divine interpretation.

Selection Procedure: Traditionally, after the passing of a King, the position is passed down through the Marumakkathayam system of lineage. The matrilineal family members gather together at the residence of the King, tenter a trance-like state known as Uranju Thulluka, during which divine will is believed to guide the selection of the next ruler. However, in the recent succession, Raman Rajamannan assumed kingship voluntarily without performing the ritual, leading to differing opinions among the elders regarding divine legitimacy.

A Unique Governance System

9 Kaani

The Kaanis are senior advisors to the King administrative, spiritual, and social matters, representing various sub-groups and regions of the community. There are nine elderly Kaanis in total as advisors to the King.

As per Ramesh Gopalan & elders	As per Raman Rajamannan	As per Biju’s data and book
(i) Valayitta Valladan Kaani (ii) Chaden Purambula Kaani (iii) Kattathopran Kaani (iv) Kandamakkidadan Kaani (v) Aanakkadan Kaani (vi) Kuthiyathukolan Kaani (vii) Varakkuraliyan Kaani (viii) Kadattu Kumbulan Kaani (ix) Kalkoonthal Kaani. Apart from these 9 Kaani, an additional post called is also present named Kenjila Maniyaran Kaani.	(i) Nattumalan (ii) Kadattu Kumbulan Kaani (iii) Varakkuraliyan Kaani (iv) Kuthiyothukolan Kaani (v) Kattathopran Kaani (vi) Chaden Purambula Kaani (vii)Kandamakkidadan Kaani (viii) Kalkoonthal Kaani (ix) Muthur Kaani According to Raman Rajamannan, apart from these 9 Kaani, there are later added 10 Kaani to the list who governs the Ayiramperumkuda	(i) Kattathopran Kaani (ii) Purambila Kaani (iii) Idaadan Kaani (iv) Kumbilan Kaani (v) Kenjilamaniyaran Kaani (vi) Barakku Uraliyan Kaani (vii) Bekran Kaani (viii) Kolan Kaani (ix) Kularan Kaani

Kulamthaari and Kulamthaarichi (Law and Order Enforcers)

The Kulamthaari group is responsible for maintaining law and order within the Mannan community. Their duties include settling disputes, enforcing community norms, and implementing punishments where necessary. Currently, these positions were held by men, but there are also women counterparts known as Kulamthaarichi, who performed similar roles.

As per Ramesh and Elders	As per Biju’s book

(i) Aayiram Kudiyanavan (ii) Periya Kudiyanavan (iii) Valiyulamthaari (iv) Ilamthari Kudiyanavan (v) Kattila Valiyulamthari (vi) Vela Valiyulamthari (vii) Ilayavattam (viii) Thandakaran (ix)	(i) Periya Kudiyanavan (ii) Aayiram Kudiyanavan (iii) Ilamthari Kudiyanavan (iv) Valiyulamthaari (v) Ilayavattam (vi) Valiya Thandakkaran (vii) Thannipatha (viii) Pongalali Kudiyanavan

Traditionally, those who disobeyed community laws were subject to punishment as per these local governing systems.

A Unique Governance System

4 Vaathi

There are four main Vaathis in the Mannan governance structure. They serve as intermediaries between the community and the gods, interpreting divine messages and rituals, especially during times of difficulty or calamity.

As per Ramesh and elders	As per Ramanan Rajamannan	As per Biju

(i) Nedumpura Vathi (ii) Udumpara Vathi (iii) Adipisha Vathi	(i) Valiya Vathi (ii) Kadadu Vathi (Puli Vathi) (Kunju Vathi) (iii) Edasherikkadu	(i) Adipisha Vathi (kizhakku) (ii) Kannapra Vathi (padinjaru) (iii) Kulathu Vathi (na

Aanavaathi & Pullivaathi : Due to increasing wild animal conflict, a meeting was adjourned and a resolution was reached. To instill Adukkattu Nagamalean as Aanavathi. Similarly, Kandamalath Paneekudi was given charge of being Pulivaathi

A Unique Governance System

10 Ulamthari Ulamtharichikal

The Kulamthaari group is responsible for maintaining law and order within the Mannan community. Their duties include settling disputes, enforcing community norms, and implementing punishments where necessary. Currently, these positions are held by men, but there are also women counterparts known as Kulamthaarichi, who performed similar roles.

As per Ramesh and Elders	As per Biju’s book

(i) Aayiram Kudiyanavan (ii) Periya Kudiyanavan (iii) Valiyulamthaari (iv) Ilamthari Kudiyanavan (v) Kattila Valiyulamthari (vi) Vela Valiyulamthari (vii) Ilayavattam (viii) Thandakaran (ix)	(i) Periya Kudiyanavan (ii) Aayiram Kudiyanavan (iii) Ilamthari Kudiyanavan (iv) Valiyulamthaari (v) Ilayavattam (vi) Valiya Thandakkaran (vii) Thannipatha (viii) Pongalali Kudiyanavan

Traditionally, those who disobeyed community laws were subject to punishment as per these local governing systems.

Law and order; mudra vadi etc.

Credits

Prepared by

Anjana, Sociologist

Vysakh Seluraj, Anthropologist

Community collaborators from Mannan community :

Aswathi, Kovilmala

Ayyapan, Kodakallu

Balan Chakkan, Kovilmala

Bineesh, Machiplavu

Biju, Chinnapara

Chinamma, Kovilmala

Chellapan, Chinnapara

Kochumon, Kumali

Kumaran, Mankulam

Kumaran VR, Korangatti

Maniyamma, Kovilmala

Maniraman, Veriyanpara

Meenakshi, Kovilmala

Muthummkuttan, Chinnapara

Nagamma, Kovilamala

Paapu, Mazhuvadi

Rajan, Kumali

Rajamma, Kovilmala

Raman Rajamannan, Kovilmala

Ramani, Chinnapara

Rajappan, Mazhuvadi

Rajamma, Kanjikuzhi

Radha, Chinnappara

Rajamani Pandyan, Vaathikudi

Rejitha, Venkayappara

Ramesh Gopalan, Kovilmala

Raju Mani, Chinnapara

Saji, Venkayappara

Sarasamma, Chinnappara

Sooryapathbhanabhan, Maniyarankudi

Sujatha, Kovilmala

Sukumaran, Mazhuvadi

Susheelamma, Kovilamala

Thambi, Adimali

Thangamma, Kovilmala

Thankappan Raman, Vaathikudi

Tulasi, Kovilmala

Umesh, Kallara

Ulakan, Kumali

The research report prepared as part of Earthlore Season 2 supported by Samagatha Foundation.