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.

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