PALIYAR Tribe of Kerala

The Paliyar are an indigenous tribal community of Kerala, primarily settled in Idukki district with a population of around 1,500 across seven panchayats. Once forest dwellers practicing shifting cultivation, they were resettled after the Mullaperiyar dam submerged their lands. Today, they preserve rich traditions of worship, festivals, songs, and crafts while adapting to modern livelihoods, with Kumily, Vandanmedu, Chakkupallam, and Kattappana as their major settlements.The Paliyar are an indigenous tribal community of Kerala, primarily settled in Idukki district, with a population of around 1,500 across seven panchayats. Once forest dwellers practicing shifting cultivation, they were resettled after the Mullaperiyar dam submerged their lands. Today, they preserve rich traditions of worship, festivals, songs, and crafts while adapting to modern livelihoods, with Kumily, Chakkupallam, and Puliyanmala as their major settlements.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 : About The Community

Chapter 2 : Social Life

Chapter 3 : Paliya Artforms

Chapter 4 : Belief System

- Chapter 1 : About The Community
- Chapter 2 : Social Life
- Chapter 3 : Paliya Artforms
- Chapter 4 : Belief System

- Festivals
  - Paliyulsavam at Chakkupallam
  - Paliyulsavam at Kumali
- List of Documentaries
- Credits

Chapter 1 : About The Community

During our field visit to the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border regions around Thekkady, Paliya community members described how their identity is closely tied to the forested landscapes they have long inhabited. Many expressed a strong belief that their ancestors lived in these forests for generations. They also spoke about how the later demarcation of the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border created different narratives about whether their identity should be linked to one state or the other. While large Paliyar populations continue to live in the Tamil Nadu border areas, in Kerala they form a small diaspora. Kerala Government State Reports from 2013 record the Paliyar population at 1,484 in Kerala, though people in the hamlets often said the actual number is much lower.

> “Aruvi, chieftain of the Kumali settlement, explains that the word Paliyar originates from Palichiyammayudemakkal, which literally translates to “children of the Goddess Palichiyamma.” In contrast, Ganesh, chieftain of Chakupallam, offers a different etymology for Paliyan, suggesting it comes from baliye pedichu vannavan, meaning “one who was afraid of the human ritual sacrifice, or bali.”

Elders described an earlier nomadic life within the forest. They practiced shifting agriculture and moved from place to place. Several individuals recalled how the construction of the Mullaperiyar dam during British rule submerged their traditional farmlands. This event appears central in their collective memory and is linked to the dispersal of the single settlement that once existed.

Community leaders such as Aruvi and Sarojama from Kumali shared their belief and collective memory that the community has resided in the Thekkady forest region across generations. In contrast, leaders including Ganeshan and Selvan from the Chakupallam settlement referred to ancestral narratives that speak of the community’s migration from the region now known as Tamil Nadu to Kerala, under various circumstances. One such narrative recounts a migration led by a community leader who was faced with a mandate to sacrifice one of his sons, prompting the community’s departure.

> “There are now seven to eight Paliyar settlements in Kerala, including Chakkupallam, Puliyanmala, and Anakkara. The original settlement had to split when people fled the spread of epidemics during the colonial period. Later, they dispersed into multiple hamlets across what is today the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border.”
> - Aruvi, the chieftain of the Kumali settlement
>
> “The community here in Kerala is remembered as having descended from a single family. Over time, conflicts among the leaders caused the family to separate, and they eventually formed settlements in Puliyanmala, Chakkupallam, and the surrounding areas.”
> - Kumaresan, Chakkupallam

We observed that the largest Paliya settlement was located at Kumali. Other hamlets such as Chakkupallam and Shivalingakudi had significantly smaller populations. We were informed that many of the smaller settlements have, over time, largely adopted Christianity. These shifts appear to have contributed to cultural differences and, at times, tensions in the ways of life practiced across different settlements.

The Paliya community in Kumali, which is situated within forest reserve lands, appears to organize much of its social and ritual life around the worship of Palichiyamma. The community has a more established temple and shows greater adaptation to mainstream forms of worship, along with the continued practice of Paliya Nritham within the hamlet. These practices suggest a particular articulation of tradition shaped by both continuity and interaction with dominant cultural forms.

In contrast, the Paliya community in Chakkupallam is located outside the forest reserve lands and was more accessible during our field visits. Community members there perceive their cultural identity as being closely associated with, and deeply influenced by, the cultural patterns of Tamil Nadu. This orientation is evident in everyday practices and social life.

Paliyar people of Kumili described to us their earlier life in Poovirishi and Kalluveri, located within what is now the core zone of the Periyar Tiger Reserve. The forest department later resettled them to their current location. Residents recounted that their relationship with the department was strained at first. According to Aruvi, interactions began to improve around 1996 or 1997 with the creation of the Eco Development Committee and its associated activities.

Chapter 2 : Social Life

Based on oral accounts that were shared with us, it is understood that in earlier times the Paliyar community practiced shifting cultivation within the forest, working collectively as a community. They also depended on the collection of forest produce for their livelihoods. Over time, the introduction and enforcement of strict forest regulations under the Forest Act curtailed these practices and limited the community's access to forest resources. In the present context, many members of the Paliyar community are employed by the Department of Forest and Wildlife, Government of Kerala, serving as forest watchers and tourism guides.

Traditional Governance System

Paliya community settlements are known as *Paliyakudi*. These hamlets are traditionally governed by a chieftain referred to as the Kaanikaran. During conversations, community members also referred to the presence of a Naattama, a younger individual who assisted the Kaanikaran in the administration of the community. There are further references to roles such as Thandakkaran and Thalayari, who were responsible for maintaining law and order within the community.

However, there is a notable discontinuity in both the practice and collective memory of this traditional governance system. Over time, the community has adapted and evolved through significant cultural transitions, resulting in the gradual abandonment of many customary practices and the adoption of new ones under the influence of external cultural forces. In earlier times, the community adhered to strict *chittakal*, or customary orders. Punishments then included practices such as tying individuals to trees, flogging after restraint, and expulsion from the hamlet, known as *ooruvilakk*.

Aruvi, the chieftain of Kumali, calls for greater self-determination, advocating increased authority for the hamlet and its leaders in managing and resolving internal matters. He believes that such a system would enhance the community's autonomy.

Selection of Kaani : The Kaani is elected through the matrilineal system of *Marumakkathayam*. The position of Kaani is traditionally held only by men. Furthermore, the designated individual should possess the desired maturity, and be a believer in Paliya beliefs and customs. If multiple candidates are eligible, the selection is made through a process known as *nellittu nokuka*. The selection usually takes place on the 16th day following the death of the previous Kaani. Unlike the Mannan community, the Paliyars do not enter into a trance during this process.

Rituals: from birth to death

(i) Thottil Charthuka

Thottil Charthuka is a ritual associated with the naming of a newborn in the Paliya community. It is observed on the seventh day after birth and marks the formal inclusion of the child into the matrilineal household. During the ritual, the infant is placed in the *thottil* (cradle) while older women of the matriline sing traditional lullabies. The naming of the child takes place as part of this ceremony. In the Paliya community, a separate name is usually given to the child according to their own customs, reflecting the importance of lineage and cultural continuity. Aruvi, the chieftain of Paliyakudi at Kumali, was born near a small stream (Aruvithodu) and hence was named Aruvi.

(ii) Motta Adi

The first shaving of a child's head is known as Motta Adi. This ritual is generally performed by the maternal uncle. Motta Adi is conducted before the clan deity to whom ritual vows or promises have been made by the family.

On this occasion, prayers are offered to Karappuswamy, Palichiyamma, and the *Vanadevathakal*, or forest deities. The ritual begins with the preparation of *Pongala*, a practice involving the boiling over of rice. The direction in which the pot overflows is carefully observed and interpreted as an indication of the will of the deities. Following this, a designated person shaves the child's head, after which turmeric is applied to the scalp. A rooster is sacrificed as part of the ritual, and the *Pongala prasadam* is then distributed among the community members who have gathered.

(iii) Menstruation

Based on accounts shared by members of the Paliya community, women in earlier times followed specific rituals during menstruation, particularly at the onset of first menstruation. When a girl attained menarche, seven women were assigned to assist her, and she was required to stay for seven days in a separate house specially constructed for this purpose. During this period, her first cousin, identified as the potential groom or *muracherukkan*, along with his friends, stands guard outside the house to ensure her safety.

On the seventh day, the girl bathed in a nearby water stream. Stones were laid out to create a path for her return to the house. After this, she carried a pot of water to the kitchen and prepared Pongala, marking the completion of her period of seclusion. At the end of the ritual, *kappam*,

offered as a token of appreciation, was given to the *muracherukkan*. Community members described how, before receiving this offering, the *muracherukkan* would playfully block the kitchen stove with his feet, preventing the young woman from proceeding with the ritual. Only after the *kappam* was presented would he step aside, allowing the ritual to continue.

(iv) Marriage

In our conversations with people of the Paliya community they told us that marriages in earlier times were conducted under the authority of the chieftain or *kaanikaran*. Following Paliya custom, marriage ceremonies took place at night, with fire serving as the primary witness. They were generally held during *chitramasam*, corresponding to April and May, a period associated with harvest and communal festivities. For the ceremony, grains were collected from every household and a common feast was prepared, reflecting the collective nature of marriage celebrations. Traditional songs and dances formed an important part of these events, which were remembered as expressions of community togetherness.

Community members also described how a bride often had multiple prospective grooms. Village elders such as the *kaanikaran* examined the proposed alliances through a process known as *nellittu nokuka* before arriving at the final decision. Prospective grooms were required to undergo several tests to assess their skills related to livelihood and survival. One such test involved hiding an object deep within the forest and asking the groom to locate it, thereby demonstrating his ability to navigate the forest and scout successfully. These tests were conducted only for male candidates, and were considered essential for marriage within the community.

A distinctive feature of Paliya marriage rituals is the use of a stone grinder, known as *thirike*, which is traditionally used for grinding grains such as millets. Community members explained that the grinder consists of two slabs, the lower *adikallu* and the upper *melkallu*. During the wedding ceremony, the woman stands on the *adikallu*, symbolizing her role in bringing stability and continuity to the household.

(v) Death

According to accounts shared by members of the Paliya community, the community maintains a common burial ground where the dead are buried. In earlier times, specific techniques were followed to create segments and sections within the burial pit, though in the present day wooden boxes are commonly used. Community members noted that the spouse of the deceased observes widowhood for the rest of their life, as second marriage is not permitted under Paliya custom.

Death is accompanied by a series of elaborate rituals. Aruvi, the chieftain, described a ritual in which soil and rice are mixed, prayers are offered, and the spirit of the deceased is bid farewell.

During this ritual, the spirit is also requested to protect the family as a benevolent presence. Different songs are sung depending on the status of the deceased, such as in the case of the death of the *kaanikaran*, a youth, a close relative, or a spouse.

The preparation of the body is carried out by the brothers in law, known as *machinamar*. They bathe the body and place it on a bamboo woven mat. In the case of deceased women, the *thali* or auspicious thread is broken and placed near the feet, and bangles are also broken as part of the ritual.

On the third day after burial, a ritual known as *kuzhi mezhukuka* is performed. The favorite food of the deceased is prepared and offered at the burial ground. Until this ritual is completed, food is not cooked in the house of the deceased. A glass of water is also kept at the burial site, as it is believed that the spirit of the deceased returns to drink the water.

Paliya Language

During our travels across several Paliyakudi hamlets, we encountered repeated references to *Paliya Basha* (the Paliya language). We learned that it is an oral language without a written script and is often described as being similar to Tamil, though marked by distinct tonal differences. Our observations indicate that only a few community elders currently retain knowledge of *Paliya Basha* in its original form, while many other community members have gradually shifted to speaking Tamil and Malayalam.

Chapter 3 : Paliya Artforms

Paliya Nritham is a traditional dance form practiced within the Paliya community and is performed by both men and women. Community members explained that the performance is accompanied by Paliya songs and musical instruments, with a repertoire of six songs commonly used.

Paliya Nritham continues to be regarded as a central art form within the community. Aruvi recalled sharing the stage with his uncle at the age of twelve, whom he remembers as an accomplished dancer. He also spoke of being teased and judged by his peers at the time. Reflecting on these experiences, Aruvi expressed pride in his later involvement in efforts to revive Paliya culture at a national level.

> “Sarojamma shared her memories of earlier times when members of the community gathered around a banyan tree at what is now the *Palichiyamma* Temple and performed Paliya Nritham around a fire at the site during many evenings.

We heard many stories about how the community used to perform Paliya Nritham within their hamlet from early days. During those times, they used to gather materials from the forest such as beads and bamboo. Natural colours were prepared for makeup using locally available materials, such as red color from squeezing teak leaves, yellow from turmeric, and white from grinding *aamakallu*, a type of rock into powder.

Visibility for Paliya Nritham

In Kumali, cultural activities remain vibrant, and community members formed a cultural art troupe named *Vellayankani Paliya Parambaragatha Nritha Sangam*. Through this troupe, they traveled to various parts of the country, including Delhi, Orissa, and Jharkhand. The formation of the *Vellayankani Paliya Parambaragatha Nritha Samithi* was described as an initiative to create livelihood opportunities for the community through the performance of Paliya Nritham.

Vellayankani Paliya Parambaragatha Nritha Sangham is named after a great grand elder named Vellayankani in the community story.

According to Aruvi's memory, the community first performed in a small event at a school in Kumali where a tribal festival was conducted and the community won an award for their dance and slowly started to take recognition thereafter with further stages opening up. Aruvi remembers how once they finished their performance with a song that calls for rain at Ernakulam, the weather changed and it started to rain.

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> **Paliyanritham For Livelihood**
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> Aruvi remembers that in the late 1990s, the forest department approached the community to perform the Paliya Nritham as a tourism program through the Eco-Development Committee under the Forest Department, to create a livelihood option for the community members. "After performing the Paliya Nritham before a minister, we were appreciated and encouraged to perform and showcase our culture."
>
> Aruvi remembers a secretary from the forest department named Jyothikumar being instrumental in helping with designing the ornaments and costumes for the troupe and their performance. And slowly as we generated income we were able to further repair and develop our instruments which were quite old at the time.
>
> In the later stages, the community decided to stop associating with the department and their tourism programs due to operational challenges.

At the same time, differing opinions exist outside the community regarding the origin and authenticity of the form as it is performed today. We encountered views suggesting that the present form is a constructed performance created primarily for the stage and not entirely rooted in older traditions. However, our interactions indicate that a traditional dance form does exist in community memory, particularly associated with performances around a fire near the banyan tree.

From our perspective, Paliya Nritham, like many art forms, has undergone processes of adaptation

and transformation over time. The limited number of Paliya songs and the highly structured and choreographed steps observed today appear to be part of this evolution. These developments can also be understood as revival efforts by the community to assert their cultural values and seek wider recognition and appreciation.

> **The Youth Festival Dilemma**
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> Paliya Nritham is now widely performed at Kerala State Youth Festival venues each year and has received numerous awards. However, Aruvi expressed mixed feelings about this development. While he acknowledges that the festival has brought wider visibility to the art form, he questions whether it is being presented with the appropriate intent.
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> According to Aruvi, Paliya Nritham must be performed with faith and reverence, as it is a form of *Aradhana* Nritham, or dance of worship. In the context of youth festivals, however, it is often treated as a competitive item, with emphasis placed on marks and prizes. He feels that this competitive framing strips the performance of its spiritual essence and core meaning. When the dance becomes a graded activity, he argues, its original rhythm and fluidity are lost and replaced by a rigid, standardized structure.
>
> Aruvi also pointed to instances where incorrect lyrics are used in performances. One such example involves the original line "*vareeraya vareeraya*" being rendered as "*varekaala varekaala*." While the original song is an invocation of revered ancestors and a call to nature, the altered version invokes *Kaalan*, a figure associated with death — an interpretation that stands in direct contradiction to the spirit and intent of Paliya Nritham. Despite this, such performances are often rewarded at festivals without adequate cultural understanding.
>
> Aruvi emphasizes the need for greater cultural responsibility, urging performers, judges, and institutions to engage more deeply with the traditions they present. He believes that the lack of informed evaluation and sensitivity in these performances has caused distress within the community.

Paliyar Songs

Paliya culture is often described by community members as being rich in songs. During our interactions, we were told that songs exist for many situations encountered in everyday life. Elders are said to possess extensive knowledge of these songs, though they rarely sing them openly. Instead, such songs are expressed during intimate or personal moments, and it is often in these contexts that younger members of the community are exposed to this reservoir of cultural knowledge.

In the context of Paliya Nritham, community members identified around six songs that are commonly used, including the *Nellukuthu* song, *Kalyana* song, *Mullaperiyar* song, *Aaradhana* song, *Komali* song, and *Tharattu* song. These are the songs that are most frequently sung, revived, and circulated within the community today.

Aruvi, the chieftain of the Kumali settlement, reflected on how he has forgotten many of the songs and their lyrics. At present, the six songs associated with Paliya Nritham have been written down and preserved within the community. It remains unclear whether these songs have been in use since earlier times or whether they were composed or formalized during efforts to develop Paliya Nritham as a livelihood practice. However, given the community's own articulation of a rich song culture, we understand these songs as part of a broader continuum of tradition, adaptation, and cultural evolution.

(i) *Nellukuthu Paattu*: The *Nellukuthu Paattu* is rooted in the traditional agrarian practices of Paliyar. This song and dance sequence visually and audibly narrates the entire cycle of paddy cultivation, from the crucial phase of seed sowing to the culminating period of harvesting. As an ethnographic record, it provides invaluable insights into traditional agricultural methods, the communal labor involved, and the inherent gratitude towards the land's bounty. The rhythmic movements and lyrical narratives are not merely entertainment but serve as a living archive of their sustenance strategies and their profound connection to the natural environment. This performance exemplifies the intersection of cultural expression and daily subsistence within the community.

(ii) *Kalyana Paattu*: The *Kalyana Paattu* in Paliyar tradition represents a distinct genre of ceremonial music and performance integral to their marriage rituals. This song and dance form is characterized by reciprocal, playful banter between the families of the bride and groom.

Structurally, it involves the groom's kin engaging in lighthearted teasing of the bride's family, and vice versa. It highlights the social dynamics, kinship structures, and the culturally sanctioned mechanisms for communal interaction and humor within Paliyar matrimonial ceremonies. It serves as a significant record of their social customs, demonstrating the community's approach to celebration, inter-familial relations, and the use of performance as a medium for social commentary and cohesion.

(iii) *Mullaperiyar Paattu*: This specific song from the Paliyar community stands as a critical piece of oral history, offering a unique indigenous perspective on the construction of the Mullaperiyar Dam. It serves as an archival record, articulating the experiences of Paliyar ancestors who participated in, or were impacted by, this monumental engineering project. The narrative, meticulously passed down through generations, often details the challenges faced, the labor contributed, and the socio-economic transformations witnessed by the community during the dam's construction. This song is a vital resource for understanding the human dimension of large-scale infrastructure development from the viewpoint of local communities, preserving narratives that may not be present in official historical documents.

(iv) *Aaradhana Nritham*: The Aradhana Nritham is the foremost ritualistic dance of the Paliyar community, embodying profound spiritual and cultural significance. This performance is a direct act of veneration dedicated to their clan deity, Elaath Pallichiyamma. Ethnographically, it is presented following the annual harvest, serving as a formal offering of the year's agricultural yield, often accompanied by the preparation and presentation of *Pongala*. This dance is a powerful expression of their animistic beliefs, their deep reverence for their ancestral deity, and their spiritual connection to the land and its productivity. It provides crucial insights into their religious practices, ceremonial cycles, and the role of collective worship in reinforcing community identity and seeking divine blessings for prosperity.

Apart from these songs there are small songs used in the occasion while traveling to forest, describing the wild animals etc. This highlights how close the Paliyar community keeps their identity with music. In addition to these mentioned songs there are special songs during the event of death. Different songs are sung at the event of the death of various individuals such as in case of the passing away of *Kaanikaran*, a youth, a relative or spouse etc. A few of the community elders know these songs.

Musical instruments

Along with the music Paliya community uses various musical instruments such as *Nakaara, Mulachenda/Mulathalam, Chattithalam, Jalara, Urumi/Udukkua & Chilanka.*

Out of these, *Nakara, Mulathalam* and *Chattithalam* used to be the traditional instruments of the Paliya community. Once the *chattithalam* instrument was broken, the community shifted to using a *djembe* instead. Likewise *jalara, chilanka* and *urumi* are also variations from their traditional instruments.

Chapter 4 : Belief System

The Paliya community today worships multiple deities, with the prominent clan deity varying from one hamlet to another. During our fieldwork at the Kumily settlement, Aruvi described the existence of two clans within the community, locally known as *Memala Paliyar* and *Kaattu Paliyar*. These clans are distinguished by their worship of *Palichiyamma* and *Karuppuswamy* respectively. He explained that *Palichiyamma* is worshiped by the larger section of the community and noted that, in earlier times, marriage practices were regulated on the basis of clan affiliation.

Our observations from other settlements indicate further variation in patterns of worship. In Chakkupallam, community members worship *Badrakali* along with *Karuppuswamy*, while in Shivalingakudi, *Mariyamman* is the primary deity. In some settlements, Christianity has also been adopted as a newer faith tradition, reflecting ongoing religious diversification within the community.

Community members described how, in earlier times, deities were worshiped beneath trees using natural symbols such as rocks, anthills, and tridents. Over time, temples were constructed as part of the community's social and cultural transformation. Examples include the *Badrakali* temple at Chakkupallam, the *Mariyamman* temple at Shivalingakudi, and the *Palichiyamma* temple at Kumily. At present, *Karuppuswamy* alone continues to be worshiped according to older practices, as community belief prohibits the construction of idols for this deity.

Once every year, the Paliya community observes a festival during which they offer prayers, pay tribute to their deities, and express gratitude for the well being and protection of the community. Across settlements, we observed significant adaptation and evolution in the forms and styles of worship practiced today.

Paliya Ulsavam

Paliya communities across different settlements worship different deities and follow distinct ritual practices. Nevertheless, these communities collectively observe the annual Paliya Ulsavam in their respective hamlets, offering tribute and expressing gratitude to their deities over a celebration that generally spans three days.

At Chakupallam, Paliya Ulsavam is conducted at the *Badrakali* temple, while in Kumily the festival centers around the *Palichiyamma* temple. The *Palichiyamma* temple is more developed and formally established, and as a result, differences in attire and ritual practices can be observed. Despite these variations, many ritual elements remain common across both celebrations, including votive offerings such as *Mulappayaru, Theechatti, Maavilakku*, and *Kummiyadi*.

> **Importance of Women in Paliyar festivals**
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> Across the settlements we visited, women of all age groups were observed actively leading the festival. Upon inquiry, community members remarked that faithful women devotees are especially favoured by the Goddess. These women lead the celebrations by performing key rituals such as *Ammanvilakku*, *Mulappayaru, Theechatti*, and *Kummiyadi*. Throughout our travels across various Paliyar settlements, we experienced their warmth and welcoming nature.

Paliya Ulsavam at Chakkupallam

At Chakkupallam, the annual festival is conducted at the community temple dedicated to the goddess *Badrakali*. Community members explained that offerings and prayers made by devotees throughout the year are collectively fulfilled on the festival day. The *Sree Badrakali* Temple was constructed about thirteen years ago through the initiative of the Paliya community at Chakkupallam, following an incident in which the community faced backlash while visiting another temple in the region. Prior to the construction of the temple, worship at the site was carried out using a trident and an anthill as sacred symbols.

After the temple was built, several ritual practices were incorporated into the annual festival, including *theechatti, maavilakku, amman vilakku*, and *mulappayaru*. Community members noted that, due to the strong historical and cultural connections of the Paliyars with Tamil society, many of these rituals were adopted from temple traditions in Tamil Nadu. Over time, the temple has gained wider recognition, and people from surrounding regions now visit during the festival to offer prayers and make offerings.

In 2025, the Paliya Ulsavam at Chakkupallam, which is usually celebrated over three days, was conducted in a single day due to financial constraints. We observed devotees performing rituals sequentially from dusk until late at night, starting with the *kodiyettam*, or hoisting of the ceremonial flag, which took place early in the morning. After the completion of the rituals,

community members gathered around the temple at night to perform the *Kummiyadi* dance. This was followed by the *kodiyirakkam*, the lowering of the ceremonial flag. The festival concluded with the *mulappayaru* being floated into a nearby water-body, symbolically marking the closure of the celebrations.

(i) *Mulappayaru*

Mulappayaru is a ritual of votive offering done by the devotees to have favorable outcomes in their life, devoid of hardships and challenges. It is a ritualistic process where seeds of millets, corn seeds, peas etc. are ritualistically kept for sprouting for a period of 7 days. During these 7 days, before the actual festival, devotees take strict vows. Use of supporting stands for yielding the sprouting seeds are made out of coir, wood and steel bars placed in clay pots and decorated into various shapes.

The growth of the sprouts are symbolised for the blessing from deities. It is also believed that when devotees do not follow strict vows during these 7 days, it would be reflected upon the growth of the sprouts - the sprouts may wilt and dry even. Resulting in ongoing unfavorable situations in life, they are forced to take up the offerings and prayers next year, putting extra effort as well.

(ii) *Maavilakku*

Maavilakku is also a votive offering made by the devotees asking for blessings from the god. *Mavilakku* consists of a lamp kept on a pot and covered with a paste made out of flour. Similar to *mulappayaru*, any mistakes by the devotee during the period of vow would be reflected during the proceedings, such as the lamp not staying lit throughout, devotees not being able to walk under the weight of the pot etc.

Amman Vilakku is also a similar offering made of lamb in a pot with flour mixture. In the case of Amman vilakku, a photo of goddess and flowers are additionally present.

(iii) *Theechatti*

Theechatti, a votive offering, is done for protection against diseases such as smallpox (*vasoori*) and measles (*anjaampani*). Usually *theechatti* prayers are done for a period of 3 years. According to Ganeshan, *Oorumoopan* at Chakkupallam, some opt to take the *theechatti* for a lifetime as well.

Special pots are brought from Tamilnadu for the purpose. Ingredients like camphor, neem tree, frankincense (*kunthirikkam*), etc are put in an earthen pot and put on fire during the ritual. The devotee has to take the flaming pot and walk to prove their faith and please the Gods.

There are restrictions to take *theechatti* offering, warns Ganeshan. Families grieving death within the last year are not allowed to take *theechatti*. Those families with community restriction or punishments are also barred from taking the ritual. If someone defies, their *theechatti* will not flame enough. In that case, further resolution has to be sought from the gods.

(iv) *Kaap Kettuka*

Kaap Kettuka, is the process of tying a turmeric onto the hand of a devotee as a bracelet for ritualistic purposes. Dried turmeric is wrapped in a white cloth and tied to the hands of the devotee during the period of vow. Care is taken not to break the turmeric.

(v) *Kummiyadi*

Kummiyadi, a dance performance accompanied with *kummiyadi* songs are performed by women who are offering *Mulappayaru*. *Kummiyadi* has to be performed for all 7 days. Any mistakes in practicing the k*ummiyadi*, will be reflected on *Mulappayaru* and *Maavilakku* rituals.

Paliya Ulsavam at Kumily

Paliya Ulsavam at Kumily is celebrated for worshiping *Palichiyamma* along with other deities. This is an annual festival previously celebrated during the harvest season and is performed to offer tribute to their deities and to show their gratitude.

> **Story of *Palichiyamma* Temple**
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> *Palichiyamma* is the clan deity worshiped at Kumily, alongside *Karuppuswamy*, with dedicated families responsible for the worship of each deity. Aruvi recounts : “A temple for *Palichiyamma* was planned beneath the large banyan tree where worship had traditionally taken place. The community lacked the funds for construction, and progress was slow. When the then Secretary in charge suddenly passed away in an accident along with a few community members, followed by a day of thunderstorms, the community became alert and fearful, interpreting these events as a dire omen. Taking it as a sign of the Goddess’s communication, the construction of the temple was carried forward with the support of the wider community, following Brahmanical rituals. Previously, festivals and rituals were conducted in the forest itself using traditional methods.”

The Paliya festival happens annually in April depending on the *pathamudayam* in the Malayalam calendar. During the annual festival at Paliyakudi, the community travels into the deep forest of Kalluveriyar, 15 kms from Thekkadi, as a rally in order to bring the deities from their place to the current settlement. It would take 3 days to trek into the forest and travel back from the temple to Kalluveriyar and to complete the poojas. This is done a week before the main festival.

According to the belief of the Paliya community, women are tasked to bring back 9 pots of water from the region of Kalluveriyar by walking. Special rituals are done at the place for this purpose. Men also would accompany the women by providing protection. This sacred water is used for rituals as well as sprinkled on the boundary of village for protection from any disease and unfavorable situations. A handful of soil is also brought in as a symbolic gesture, ensuring the presence of Goddess *Palichiyamma* for the festival. The community members have to take specific vows before going on this pilgrim trip. After collecting the water, the community treks back to the temple.

This is not a simple journey, but a ritualistic process instead. Some of the people can be seen entering a trance while traveling. Women members traveling with sacred water symbolises the travel of *Palichiyamma* to the village, whereas *Karuppuswamy* family members are seen in the front, walking while performing trance, paving the path for the women. This symbolises *Karuppuswamy* protecting and paving the path for *Palichiyamma* towards the festival.

After reaching back at the village, the community uses the water to prepare the deities at the temple. They perform the ritual of *abhishekam* with the water. On the next day, *kodiyettam*, a flag hoisting ceremony for the festival at the temple occurs. After which for 7 days the community observes a period of strict vow until the main festival. The community strictly follows a vegetarian diet during this phase. Men and women are seen sleeping separately, observing celibacy for this period.

Women also prepare for the *Mulappayaru* ritual during this time. Seeds are kept for sprouting in the temple in a special designated region, taking care to avoid direct sunlight. Selected women are designated to look after the *mulappayaru*. Every evening women perform *kummiyadi* at the venue, a dance ritual for pleasing the Gods. It is believed that *kummiyadi* aids in the growth of *Mulappayaru*.

After the week gap, the main festival happens for a span of 3 days at the hamlet with votive offerings like *Mavilakku, Mulappayaru, Shoolamkuthal, Swamy Thulluka* and *Pongala* performed by

the devotees.

Karuppuswamy Temple & Festival

Karuppuswamy is the clan deity of Paliyar. *Karuppuswamy* is believed to be a *kaval-daivam*, the one who guards the entire village. It is said that there are 21 forms of *Karuppan* in total, out of which *Vanakaruppan* is being worshiped at Chakkupallam.

We found the *Karuppuswamy* temple at a sacred land in the middle of a cardamom plantation at Chakupallam. There is no idol for *Karuppuswamy*. Usually a sacred stone is selected from the deep forest for the purpose. A whip and iron billhook symbols are associated with *Karuppuswamy*. It is normal practice to seek permission of *Karuppuswamy* first for any rituals in the community. Otherwise repercussions are feared.

An annual festival is celebrated here on *Chithra Pournami* day, which was on May 12th during 2025. Certain designated families among the *Karuppuswamy* followers have specific ritual duties during the festival.

> "Preparations for the *Karuppuswamy* festival start a day before in the village. People travel into the deep forest to collect sacred water from unpolluted streams for use in the festival. In the forest, seven pits are dug near a water source and the water is collected in earthen pots. *Poojas* are performed during this ceremony, and children are also involved. The collected water is poured on *Karuppuswamy's* stone idol to prepare it for the festival. *Poojas* are then held at night in the *Karuppuswamy* temple. Women are not allowed to take part in this event, whereas men from the entire community are expected to be present at the temple for the night," Selvan from Chakkupallam explained.

The next day, from early morning, poojas and rituals lead into the festival at sunrise. All the gods are invoked and offerings are made one by one according to votive promises. First, the *vanadevathas* are called and a *pongala* is prepared for them.

Next, *Karuppuswamy* is invoked through the sacrifice of a black goat. People await the deity's response to see whether the offering is accepted or rejected. It is believed that *Karuppuswamy*

possesses the goat in the style of horse riding if the offering is accepted. If rejected, additional rituals are performed to seek the deity's guidance, and the goat may need to be replaced. The community believes that as the gods accept the offered death of the animal, they protect the people by preventing other deaths in the community for the coming year. Before the sacrifice, the goat is fed turmeric water as a gesture of kindness and forgiveness.

After this, other gods such as the *Ammanmar*, the seven deity sisters, are invoked. Offerings are made to each deity. Goats and hens are sacrificed depending on the ritual requirements. The ritual for calling *Adumthirukani* is unique and involves tying a person upside down to a wooden utensil called an *olakka* and spinning them from a suspended position. This is done to contain any malevolent spirits in the village. Offerings are made to these spirits and a hen is sacrificed. Deities such as *Rakamma* and *Valiyaveerapandi* are also invoked during the festival.

During the festival, ritual performers often engage in *nellittunokuka*, a divination practice used to determine which deities are present. If a deity is found to be absent, additional rituals are carried out to resolve the issue.

Nellittunokuka

This is a system of divination which is used for prediction of fortunes. A handful of grains are used for this purpose. The ritual practitioner asks the god for their answers and checks on the layout of the grains in their hand. The alignment of the pointed side of the grains are observed and analysed for answers.

A cane called *perambu* and a wooden stick called *ammathadi* are used for rituals involving the *vanadevatha* and *Ammanmar*. A cane made from a wild plant called *chatta* is used for rituals related to *Karuppuswamy*.

Toddy, tobacco, coconut, fruits, flower garlands, sandalwood and saffron are offered to *Karuppuswamy* and related deities. As families pray and participate deeply in the rituals, some individuals are believed to become possessed by the deities. This trance state is referred to as *aaduka*. Certain families are known specifically for being possessed by *Karuppuswamy* and related deities.

Pongala is another important offering during the festival, and the *prasadam* prepared is distributed at the end of the rituals. Animals sacrificed during the festival are used for the community feast, while the liver of the black goat sacrificed to *Karuppuswamy* is kept as tribute to the deity.

Food offerings for the deities are also provided in the form of *padi-ari*. Ritual practitioners sprinkle food grains at the four corners of the temple, symbolising a feast for the deities and asking for protection from diseases such as smallpox and measles.

At the end of the festival, rice mixed with the goat's blood, called *raktha-chor*, is placed at the *Karuppuswamy* temple. It is believed that malevolent beings, including spirits and ghosts, come to feed on it. For seven days, people are restricted from visiting or going near the temple premises. Memories of incidents where someone accidentally approached the area and fell prey to these spirits remain vivid within the community.

Festivals

Paliya Ulsavam is an annual festival celebrated by the Paliyar community in Kerala during the harvest season, typically in April. Historically, the festival coincided with the community's agricultural cycle, functioning as a ritual of gratitude to their deities for protection against harm and as a prayer for future prosperity. While the festival once took place in open community spaces, centred around a sacred tree with gatherings, feasts, and ritual dances, it has transitioned over time into temple-based worship. This shift reflects both cultural adaptation and the community's effort to preserve collective identity while responding to external social and religious pressures.

The Paliyar community are seen worshipping their clan deities such as Palichiyamma and Karuppswamy. Recently, newer temples have been constructed for different deities within the community. Badrakali temple at Chakupallam, Mariyamma temple at Shivalingakudi and Palichiyamma temple along with other deities at Kumali are examples.

Festivals

Paliyulsavam at Chakkupallam

The Emergence of the Badrakaliyamman Temple

At present, Paliya Ulsavam is closely associated with the Sree Badrakaliyamman Temple in Chakkupallam, constructed 13 years ago through the initiative of the Paliya community. The construction of this temple was a response to an incident in which the community faced discrimination when visiting another temple in the region. Before the establishment of this temple, ritual practices were performed at a site marked only by a trident and an anthill.

The temple's construction marked a significant shift in ritual life. With a permanent space for worship, votive rituals were institutionalised into the festival calendar. Many of these practices, including forms of prayer and offerings, draw inspiration from Tamil Nadu's temple traditions, underscoring the community's strong cultural ties to Tamil heritage. Today, the temple has gained recognition beyond the community itself, attracting devotees from distant locations who participate in offerings during the annual festival.

Festival Structure and Ritual Practices

Preparations

The festival begins with *kodiyettam*, the ritual hoisting of a flag at the temple, which marks the commencement of a week-long period of vows and restrictions. During this time, devotees wear *kaapu*, a turmeric bracelet tied to the hand with ritual care. The unbroken turmeric is believed to symbolise the integrity of the vow.

Alongside, preparation of *mulapayaru* is initiated. Seeds such as millet, corn, and peas are placed in a vessel to sprout and to be used later in the festival ritual. Women play a central role in this phase of the festival through *kummi adi*, a community dance performed every evening alongside

devotional songs. This performance is directly tied to the efficacy of *mulapayaru*; mistakes in the dance are believed to negatively affect the growth of the sprouts and the fulfilment of associated vows.

The Main Festival

After the preliminary week of vows, the main festival unfolds over three days. A variety of votive rituals and offerings take place, including *maavilakku*, *amman vilakku*, *mulapayaru*, *theechatti*, and *kavadi*. These rituals culminate in the *ghoshayatra*, a ceremonial procession on the final day, after which a concluding temple ritual is performed.

> **Mulappayaru & Karakam:** Millet and other seeds are sprouted in a specially arranged supporting structure using clay pots, supported by coir, wood, or steel frames, and decorated in symbolic arrangements. Devotees observe strict vows during the sprouting period, and the health of the sprouts is interpreted as an indicator of divine favour. Sprouts that wither or fail are understood as consequences of lapses in ritual observance, requiring the devotee to renew their vows and offerings in the following year.

> **Maavilakku**: This offering consists of a lamp placed on a pot, covered with a paste made of flour. Devotees must maintain ritual purity during the vow period; any disruption is believed to manifest during the ritual, such as the lamp failing to remain lit or the pot becoming difficult to carry.

> ***Amman Vilakku****: Similar to maavilakku, but the pots prepared are kept with a framed image of the goddess and flower decorations in addition.*

> **Theechatti**: This is a votive ritual performed for protection against illnesses such as smallpox and measles. Special clay pots, often sourced from Tamil Nadu, are filled with ingredients such as camphor, neem leaves, and frankincense, and then ignited. Devotees carry these flaming pots as a demonstration of devotion and faith. Restrictions apply to this offering: families

> that have experienced a recent bereavement or are under social sanctions within the community are prohibited from participating. If these prohibitions are violated, it is believed that the flames will not ignite properly, requiring further ritual resolution.

Concluding Rituals

The festival concludes with collective worship, *kummi adi*, and prayers at the temple. Following the ritual lowering of the flag (*kodimaram*), the *mulapayaru* sprouts are carried to a nearby pond and immersed there, symbolically returning them to nature and closing the cycle of ritual obligations.

Festivals

Paliyulsavam at Kumali

Palichiyamma Temple and Origins

The community's faith centers around Palichiyamma, their clan deity, worshipped alongside Karuppuswamy at Kumily. Dedicated families are entrusted with rituals for each deity. Initially, worship was conducted beneath a large banyan tree. Plans to build a temple for Palichiyamma faced delays due to lack of funds, until an unexpected turn of events reshaped community resolve.

Years ago, the sudden death of the then temple secretary and a following thunderstorm the very next day, the incident was seen as an omen. The community came together, continued the construction, and completed it with public support, this time observing Brahmanical rituals.

> "**Aruvi,** chieftain from Kumily settlement, recalls, "The word *Paliyar* itself originates from *Palichiyammayude Makkal*, meaning *children of Goddess Palichiyamma*."

The Forest Pilgrimage

One of the most unique aspects of the festival is the ritualistic journey to **Kalluvariyar**, a forest site about 15 km from Thekkady. A week before the festival, the community embarks on a three-day trek to collect sacred water and soil from the ancestral shrine at Kalluvariyar.

According to belief, women carry nine pots of water from Kalluvariyar, while men accompany them for protection. This water is used for rituals and sprinkled along the village boundaries as protection against disease and misfortune. A small amount of soil is also brought back, symbolising the presence of Palichiyamma at the festival.

The procession is deeply symbolic: women carrying the sacred water represent Palichiyamma's journey to the settlement, while male family members of Karuppuswamy walk ahead in trance, signifying the deity's role in protecting her path.

Rituals of Preparation

On returning to the village, the deities are prepared with abhishekam using the sacred water. The next day, the **Kodiyettam** (flag hoisting) signals the start of a seven-day observance period, during which the community maintains strict vows. Both men and women follow a vegetarian diet, practice celibacy, and sleep in separate accommodations. Before Kodiyettam, Karuppuswamy is invited to the temple from his abode through a ceremony, and his presence and blessings are sought.

Women also begin preparations for the **Mulapayaru ritual**, sprouting seeds of millet, corn, and lentils in carefully shaded areas of the temple. This sprouting is considered a direct reflection of divine blessings: healthy growth signifies favour, while wilting sprouts are seen as a result of lapses in vows. Each evening, women perform **Kummi-adi**, a devotional dance around the mulapayaru, believed to aid its growth.

The Main Festival

After a week of vows, the main festival unfolds over three days. Devotees perform a variety of votive rituals and offerings, each carrying deep spiritual meaning:

> Mulapayaru – Millet and other seeds are sprouted in a specially arranged supporting structure using clay pots, supported by coir, wood, or steel frames, and decorated in symbolic arrangements. Devotees observe strict vows during the sprouting period, and the health of the sprouts is interpreted as an indicator of divine favour. Sprouts that wither or fail are understood as consequences of lapses in ritual observance, requiring the devotee to renew their vows and offerings in the following year.

> Maavilakku & Amman Vilakku – This offering consists of a lamp placed on a pot, covered with a paste made of flour. Devotees must maintain ritual purity during the vow period; any disruption is believed to manifest during the ritual, such as the lamp failing to remain lit or the pot becoming difficult to carry. A similar offering that includes a goddess image and flowers is called Amman Vilakku.

>

> Theechatti – This is a votive ritual performed for protection against illnesses such as smallpox and measles. Special clay pots, often sourced from Tamil Nadu, are filled with ingredients such as camphor, neem leaves, and frankincense, and then ignited. Devotees carry these flaming pots as a demonstration of devotion and faith. Restrictions apply to this offering: families that have experienced a recent bereavement or are under social sanctions within the community are prohibited from participating. If these prohibitions are violated, it is believed that the flames will not ignite properly, requiring further ritual resolution.

> “ Kavadi, Swamy Thulluka, Shoolamkuthal, and Pongala – Other votive acts performed by devotees as fulfilment of vows.

Paliya Nritham: The Sacred Dance of the Community

An integral part of the festival is the **Paliya Nritham**, the traditional dance of the Paliyar community. Performed during festive nights, this dance embodies both celebration and devotion. Paliya Nritham is a collective performance by both men and women, often accompanied by rhythmic songs, hand-clapping, and the beating of traditional instruments.

Culmination in Celebration

On the final day, **Pongal** is celebrated, marking both the completion of the festival and the community’s renewed bond with their deities. Upon the completion of the festival, Goddess Palichiyamma is taken back to Kalluvariyar, with a promise to meet next year.

List of Documentaries

Since initiating our collaboration with the Paliyar 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. Among Kerala's Few : The Paliyar Tribe

Discover the story of the Paliyar community, an indigenous tribe with deep forest roots living in the Western Ghats. Once leading a nomadic life within the forest, practising shifting agriculture, the Paliyar community in Kerala has now adapted to the changing times and settled in various villages in and around Kumali. In the upcoming series of episodes, hear firsthand stories from community members about their history and culture, offering a rare glimpse into the journey of resilience, unity and cultural identity of Paliyars in Kerala.

2. Paliya Ulsavam at Chakkupallam

The Annual Paliyaulsavam at Sree Badrakaliyamman Devi Temple in Chakupallam is an expression of the Paliya community's resilience and devotion. Thirteen years ago, the Paliya community came together to build a temple for themselves, as they faced discrimination from the public while visiting nearby temples. From a simple trident and anthill as a place of worship, now the temple stands as a symbol of pride and togetherness, drawing not only the Paliyars but also devotees from far and wide. The festival brings alive rituals such as Theechatti, Maavilakku, Amman Vilakku, and Mulapayaru. Many customs reflect the community's strong ties to Tamil culture, with rituals inspired by temples in Tamil Nadu. All prayers and offerings made by devotees throughout the year are brought together in this grand annual celebration. Join us as we capture the colours, sounds, and spirit of Paliyaulsavam – a festival where faith meets tradition, and where the story of a community is told through devotion.

3. Paliya Ulsavam at Kumali

Step into the world of the Paliyar tribe and witness their annual celebration – Paliya Ulsavam! Every April, the Paliyar community from Kumaly sets out on a sacred journey to their ancestral forest, carrying back divine water, performing trance rituals, sprouting seeds, dancing in devotion, and offering fiery votive prayers. From the forest pilgrimage to the vibrant temple festival, discover how the Paliyars keep their heritage alive.

Paliya Nritham : Episodes

Paliya Nritham, a dance form practised by the Paliya community in Kerala, particularly in their settlement at Kumily, is an example of how the community builds its livelihood by upholding its cultural practices and identity. It was documented under **ARPO Earthlore**.

Tucked away from the hectic tourist spots of Thekkady, *Vellayankaani Paliya Parambaragatha Nritham,* a team of 20+ artists from Paliyakudi, Kumily performs their dance form of Paliya Nritham to their set of songs with traditional instruments.

Here are the episodes we have published to date:

1. **Nellukuthu Nritham | Paliya Nritham**

The Nellukuthu Nritham is rooted in the traditional agrarian practices of Paliyar. This song and dance sequence visually and audibly narrates the entire cycle of paddy cultivation, from the crucial phase of seed sowing to the culminating period of harvesting. As an ethnographic record, it provides invaluable insights into traditional agricultural methods, the communal labor involved, and the inherent gratitude towards the land's bounty. The rhythmic movements and lyrical narratives are not merely entertainment but serve as a living archive of their sustenance strategies and their profound connection to the natural environment. This performance exemplifies the intersection of cultural expression and daily subsistence within the community.

2. **Kalyana Paattu | Paliya Nritham**

The Kalyana Paattu in Paliyar tradition represents a distinct genre of ceremonial music and performance integral to their marriage rituals. This song and dance form is characterized by reciprocal, playful banter between the families of the bride and groom. Structurally, it involves the groom's kin engaging in lighthearted teasing of the bride's family, and vice versa.

Ethnomusicologically, it highlights the social dynamics, kinship structures, and the culturally sanctioned mechanisms for communal interaction and humor within Paliyar matrimonial ceremonies. It serves as a significant record of their social customs, demonstrating the community's approach to celebration, inter-familial relations, and the use of performance as a medium for social commentary and cohesion.

3. **Aaradhana Nritham | Paliya Nritham**

The Aradhana Nritham is the foremost ritualistic dance of the Paliyar community, embodying profound spiritual and cultural significance. This performance is a direct act of veneration dedicated to their clan deity, Elaath Pallichiyamma. Ethnographically, it is presented following the annual harvest, serving as a formal offering of the year's agricultural yield, often accompanied by the preparation and presentation of Pongala. This dance is a powerful expression of their animistic beliefs, their deep reverence for their ancestral deity, and their spiritual connection to the land and its productivity. It provides crucial insights into their religious practices, ceremonial cycles, and the role of collective worship in reinforcing community identity and seeking divine blessings for prosperity.

4. **Mullaperiyar Song | Songs of Paliyar**

This specific song from the Paliyar community stands as a critical piece of oral history, offering a unique indigenous perspective on the construction of the Mullaperiyar Dam. It serves as an archival record, articulating the experiences of Paliyar ancestors who participated in, or were impacted by, this monumental engineering project. The narrative, meticulously passed down through generations, often details the challenges faced, the labor contributed, and the socio-economic transformations witnessed by the community during the dam's construction. This song is a vital resource for understanding the human dimension of large-scale infrastructure development from the viewpoint of local communities, preserving narratives that may not be present in official historical documents.

5. **Nellukuthu Song | Songs of Paliyar**

The Nellukuthu Nritham is a performative art form of the Paliyar community, meticulously documenting their deep-rooted agrarian practices. This song and dance sequence visually and audibly narrates the entire cycle of paddy cultivation, from the crucial phase of seed sowing to the

culminating period of harvesting. As an ethnographic record, it provides invaluable insights into traditional agricultural methods, the communal labor involved, and the inherent gratitude towards the land's bounty. The rhythmic movements and lyrical narratives are not merely entertainment but serve as a living archive of their sustenance strategies and their profound connection to the natural environment. This performance exemplifies the intersection of cultural expression and daily subsistence within the community.

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Kumareashan, Chakkupallam

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