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.

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