

## Sacred Folk Festivals of Tamil Nadu

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*Studying about Folk fairs, festivals and celebrations are important areas in folklore scholarship. Folk festival is a combination of all other aspects of folklore. Celebration of folk festivals includes several rituals, believes, oral literatures, performing folk arts etc. Most of the folk festivals are sacred in nature and it relates to folk religion and vernacular calendar. Studying folk festivals is essential to understand the folk tradition of a particular region. Millions of folk festivals are celebrated in India. But unfortunately we don't have nation wide documentation of our traditional celebrations. This paper documents and disseminates five peculiar folk festivals celebrated in various parts of Tamil Nadu that reflects the pluralistic nature of Tamil culture.*

Most of the societies in the world are periodically set aside portions of time for their celebration. Celebrations are moments of special significance of the group or community. These recurring moments of special significance, with the celebrations that fill them, are called festivals. Most of the celebrations or festivals are based on particular religion. Festival cannot be defined as a particular kind of behavior. It is a set of traditional behaviors. Indeed, the festival itself often the context for the other genres of folklore. Festival is an amalgamation of believes, vows, rituals, Myths, legends, folk arts etc. Thousands of festivals are celebrated in India. Most of the festivals are celebrated on the basis of vernacular calendar. In Tamil Nadu, Several classical festivals are celebrated in Hindu temples. For instance, *Maha Magam* in the month of *Maasi*, *Thai Poosam* in the month of *Thai*, *Vaikunda egadasi* in the month of *Margazhi*, *Karthigai deepam* in the month of *Karthigai*, *Avani Moolam* in the month of *Avani* are some of the important celebration in classical Hindu religion. Apart from these there are hundreds of other festivals, which are related to the folk religion. Numbers of folk deities are worshipped in every region and periodical festival is also celebrated to these folk deities. These festivals are sacred in nature and related to agriculture, fertility and prosperity. Folk festival may be defined as a celebration of a particular group of people gathered on a particular day in a particular temple with several vows and offerings in order to satisfy the deity. Several ritual folk performances and

entertainments, animal sacrifice, offering and feast are all performed in the celebration. Folk festivals are traditionally celebrated on particular days. For instance, last Tuesday and Friday of *Aadi* month, full moon day or new moon day, etc are some of the sacred days for folk festivals. These sacred days are varied from place to place. Folk festivals are locally known as *Thiruvizha kodai* or Pongal. 'Tradition' and 'vernacular' are the two important characteristics of folk festivals. Because of these characters, folk festivals of a particular region are not known to other parts of the state. Unfortunately there is no nation wide documentation of our folk festivals and celebration. There are some books on 'folk fairs and festivals'. Generally these books documents the popular fairs and festivals but not documents the traditional celebrations performed in the rural regions. With this brief introduction herewith I have described some of the important sacred folk festivals of Tamil Nadu, which is not even known to several parts of Tamil Nadu. This documentation is based on extensive fieldwork in the natural context of celebration.

#### **Celebration of Aadi Ammavasai**

Festival is celebrated on the day of *ammavasai* (new moon day) in the Tamil month of *Aadi* (July- August) in Sorimuthu Iyannar temple. This temple is situated in the bank of river Tamirabarani at the Western Ghats in Tirunelveli district of southern Tamil Nadu. This mount is sixty Kilometers far away from Tirunelveli junction and the locality of the mount is known as Papanasam. It is believed that sage Agathiar performs his penance in this mount before hundreds of years. Formerly the Zamin of Singampatti owned this temple and later on the government administrates the temple. How ever the Zamin family is one among the temple trustees.

Iyannar is the most important folk God being worshipped in Tamil Nadu. Iyannar is believed to be the god of agriculture and the god who keeps watch over the village. In most of the villages, the Iyannar temple is found in the out skirt of the village. To protect the village, the elephant and the horse serve as *vahanas* (vehicles) to Iyannar. Iyannar is seen in various postures in different temples. The temple of Sorimuthu Iyannar situated in Mount Pothigai is considered to be the source of all other Iyannar temples in this region. There are several reasons for the name 'Sorimuthu'. The literal meaning of 'Sori' in Tamil is Shower and 'Muthu' means pearl. Bamboo trees in the hills showered pearls upon Iyannar, therefore it is known as Sori muthu Iyannar. Several deities are takes place in Sorimuthu Iyannar temple. Except Iyannar, Sangili Boothathar, Thalavai Madasamy and Muthu Patan are the other important deities in this temple. Apart from these deities several other deities are also worshipped in this temple. It is

believed that all the deities in the temple are migrated from Kerala to a place known as Thirukanangudi. Then, from there they came to Mount Pothigai. When these deities resided at Thirukanangudi, it was complained that some precious things were missing from the palace. The deities were blamed for the theft. Because of this, all the deities departed from the Thirukanangudi and settled at the temple of Iyannar at mount Pothigai.

However, during *ammavasai*, rituals are mainly performed for Sangili Boothathar, Thalaivai Madasamy and Muthu Pattan. Among these deities Thalaivai Madasamy and Muthu Pattan are non-vegetarian deities. All these deities are worshipped as a family deity by thousands of families in that region. The traditional rights of performing the rituals in the worship of these deities are owned by some families belonging to particular caste. This traditional right is known as *urimai*. Who bring and hold the *vallayam* (sacred weapon) during fire walk, who should first perform the fire walk are some of the important *urimai*. This *urimai* is differing from deity to deity. For instance, people who have *urimai* in Sangili Boothathar worship does not have *urimai* in Thalaivai Madasamy or Muthu Pattan worship and vice versa.

It is believed that the sage Agathiar performed his penance in this temple on the day of Ammavasai in the month of *Aadi*. Therefore festival is celebrated every year on that particular day. A week before the day of Ammavasai, *Kaalnathuthal* (erecting a stem) ritual is performed. The temple administrators and the Zamindar of Singampati join together and perform the ritual. This signifies that the festival has been inaugurated. After this, the devotees and the *Komarathadigal* start their fast. People who possessed by the spirit of the deity and perform divination in this temple are traditionally known as *komarathidigal*. *Komarathadi* refers singular and *komarathadigal* refers plural. Number of *Komarathidigal* is there for each deity. However, the chief *komarathadi* of each deity lead the rituals.

Devotees arrive this temple some days before the day of ammavasai from various parts of state. They bring the necessary household things like bed sheets, Mats, utensils etc. Each family select a small area in the mount surround the temple, clean up the area and put up temporary shelters with gunny bags. Some of them bring cook along with them. They prepare food, eat, worship and celebrate the festival. They eat vegetarian food until ammavasai and on the next day they eat non-vegetarian.

Lakhs of devotees took part in this festival. Hundreds of petty shops, entertainment like giant wheels, dance, orchestra etc are also arranged around the temple. The shopkeepers have to pay rent to the temple administration.

On the day of *ammavasai* several performing folk arts are performed in and around the temple. The performance of Villu paatu (Bow song) is performed in the temple in order to invoke the spirit of deity. In this performance the performer sings and narrate the respective myth of the deities accompanied with several musical instruments. This is performed on day and night.

### *Fire walk*

Fire walk is an important ritual in the celebration of *Aadi ammavasai*. Fire walk is performed for three deities at three different places. First, they perform fire walk for Sangili Boothathar, secondly for Thalavai Madasamy and finally for Muthu Pattan. *Vallayam* plays an important role in fire walk. Separate *vallayam* are there for each deity. *Vallayam* is made of wooden rod with a dia meter of 3 to 4 inches. The length of the *vallayam* is about six to seven feet. At one end of the rod, a spear like weapon made of metal is fitted. It is looks like a javelin. Devotees offer *vallayam* in order to full fill of their vow. However, the traditional right of the chief *vallayam* is belongs to a particular family. This chief *vallayam* takes place in the ritual activities. During the ritual of Fire walk, the chief *Komarathadi* of Sangili Boothathar carries the *vallayam* of Sangili Boothathar. They perform *pooja* for that *vallayam* on the place where the sage *Agathiar* perform his penance. Then the *komarathadi* takes heavy iron chain in both his hands and swings them against their chest and performs divination. Following this, bundles of firewood are arranged opposite to the Sangili Boothathar. It is set fire with camphor by the chief *komarathadi*. It takes about an hour for the firewood to be burnt. When the firewood aflame, the spirit possessed *komarathadigal* perform divination to the devotees. When the firewood are burnt and reach the form of embers, they are spread in a circular form on the floor. At that instance, the drums are performed vehemently. The chief *komarathadi* holds the *vallayam* in his hand and walks on the embers with bare foot followed by the other *komarathadigal*. Following this, separate fire walks are performed for Thalavai Madadsamy and Muthu pattan. The chief *Komarathadi* of these respective deities performs the fire walk. The first fire walk i.e for Sangili Boothathar begins at 9 pm and the third fire walk i.e for Muthu Pattan ends at around 4 am. The Zamin of Singampatti gives 'Darshan' to the devotees during this fire walk. He appears in his traditional king suit, holds sward in his hand and sit on his traditional chair. The *komarathidigal* of Muthu pattan honour the Zamin and perform the rituals. The whole night devotees of these deities are took part in the worship.

### ***Offerings and Sacrifices***

On the day of amnavasai, devotees perform vegetarian offerings to the deity. The vegetarian offerings include meals prepared of raw rice, vegetable curries, sambars etc are spread upon a plantain leaf and offer to the deity. On the next day of Amnavasai devotees offer non-vegetarian offerings to the deity Thalavai Madasamy and Muthu Pattan. They sacrifice goats, cooked it and offer to the deity. Devotees also offer pongal to the deity. Devotees arrange a temporary stove with three stones on the surroundings of the temple and cook pongal. Pongal is made of fine quality of raw rice, coconut and jagarri. One of the important offerings is the 'offering to their ancestors'. Amnavasai in the month of Aadi is considered a auspicious day to remember the ancestors. Therefore most of the devotees perform a ritual called 'tithi' to their ancestors.

The next day of amnavasai, goats are sacrificed to Muthu pattan and Thalavai Madasamy. Devotees sacrificed Goats to the deity. The devotees rear goats with special care. These goats are considered as sacred and they called as *kovil aadu* (temple goat). People do not disturb these animals by any means. On the day of sacrificing, these goats are purified with water, wear garland around its neck and apply sacred ash and vermilion on its fore head. These were brought to the temple for sacrifice. Before sacrificing they sprinkle some water on the goat's head and wait for few seconds. If the goat nodded its head they believe that the deity give permission for sacrificing, if it's does not node its head they wait for some more time and sprinkle some more water until its node. These sacrificed goats are not taken back to home. If they have taken back to home they believe that the deity will go along with the meat and cause troubles. Devotees cooked the sacrificed goats in their temporary shelters and enjoy the feast with their relatives. It is the end of the celebration.

### **Dusserah Festival**

Grand celebration of Dusserah is took place in Mutharamman temple at Kulasekara pattinam village in Tutucorin district, Southern Tamil Nadu. 'A demon called Magishaswaran had been doing atonement for a long time and obtains 'power' from Shivan. With that power he had troubled the sages. The sages complained to Shivan. At that time Nagarajan and Nagakanni did not having child for a long time and were doing atonement for a long time to be blessed with child. Shivan was impressed by their atonement and blessed them with eight girl children. The eldest child declared that she would destroy Magishaswaran. She took the form of Kali and killed the demon'. This mythical event is celebrated as Dusserah in Mutharamman temple.

In Mutharamman temple the priests are known as Bhattars. Men folk from Vellala community serve as priests. As a beginning of Dusserah celebration the temple priests wear sacred thread in their hands. A thin thread is soaked in to water, make it dry and wear in their hand after worshipping Amman. One priest tied sacred thread to another priest. This ritual is locally known as *Kaapu kathuthal*.

The next day of *Kaapu kathuthal* flag hoisting is took place. The priests, temple administrators and the other important persons in that village joined together and hoist the flag in the temple. People in this village will not go out from their village after this flag hoisting. Several *abishegams* were performed during this time. Sesame oil, turmeric powder, milk, curd, vermilion powder, honey are all separately used for *abishegams*. At the end of this ritual a priest broke a coconut, kept it on a tray, lit camphor and shows it thrice around the flag post and distributes sacred ash to the devotees. After this rituals the temple priests tied sacred thread to the devotees.

Mutharamman procession was held for eight days from the Next day of flag hoisting. The deity appears in different forms during these processions. Generally the procession stars at night. It went around several streets of the village. The village folk worship the deity and perform offerings. During these days several performances like folk dances, orchestra etc. are held in and around the village. On the tenth day that the day of Dusserah, an image of Magishasuran was kept in a cart and brought to the sea shore which is one KM away from the temple. In the mid night Mutharamman came in her cart and went around Magishasuran three times. Finally she destroys Magishasuran. A rope is tied in between Mutharamman cart and Magishasuran cart. Rocket crackers were tied in that rope. On firing the crackers from Mutharamman cart, rocket attacked Magishasuran. This ritual is known as *samharam*. This is an important and final ritual of Dusserah celebration.

Lakhs of devotees from various parts of state were participating in this Dusserah festival. Devotees wear several kinds of masks in order to full fill their vow and come to the temple. The masks are King, Queen, Animals, Birds, various gods and goddesses, police etc. Some devotees costume as political leaders also. As a vow, from the day of flag hoisting devotees wears these kinds of masks and beg at several places in order to collect money. This is kind of enactment of myth. In myth Mutharamman took several forms in order to kill the demon. This is the reason for which devotees wear masks.

### Periandavar Festival

A festival called *Periandavar Kovil Thiruvizha* is celebrated for fifteen days once in two years at Kulianoor village in Darmapuri district of Tamil Nadu. This is a multi caste village in which Vannia Goundar, Nayakars, and Dalits are living. Among them Vannia Goundar is the preponderant community.

The very first ritual of the celebration is *kall naatuthal*. For this, they worship the deity and dig a small pit on the right side of the temple. Then they took a lengthy branch of Neem or *Poovarasu* tree and they apply turmeric powder, vermilion, and sandal paste and wear garland on that branch. Then the important persons in that village and the temple administrators joined together and post the branch on that pit. This ritual is called *kaal naatuthal*. This refers that the *kodai* has been inaugurated. From the day of this ritual the devotees start their fast.

From the day of *Kaal naatuthal* people abstain fasting. They don't wear footwear inside the village; they obtain from meat; take bath twice a day. All the core rituals of the celebration are performed during the last two days of the celebration. Rituals are performed at two places. One at the temple situated in the center of the village and another in the paddy fields two miles east of the village. Both the temples are temporarily erected during the celebration. At the beginning of the ritual, two deities made of clay were kept in the center of the village. A small shelter thatched with Neem leaves was erected above the deities. The name of the deity is Periandavar. They apply sandal paste and vermilion on the deity. In front of the deity, they spread banana leaf and upon it, coconut, bananas, betel leaves, vermilion, turmeric powder and sacred ash were placed. By that time, people start gathering around that temporary shrine. Then two persons came near to the idols performing a music called *pambai*. When they started performing *pambai*, people joined in clapping their hands joyfully. After the music, one of them began to sing a *Amman* song and the multitude repeated it. At that time, the men folk put their two fingers in their mouth and make a whistling noise in order to invoke the deity.

Then the priest belonging to Vanniar community brought two feet long sword and placed them in front of the idols. He lighted the camphor and waved the flame around the idol. During the *Deebarathana* five men among the crowd were possessed by deity and dance vigorously. Each picked up sword kept in front of the idol and began to beat it vigorously across their chest, first looking at the idol and later turning to the people. On completion of this, each dancer prostrated before the idol and received the sacred ash from the priest. Sacred ash was applied to chest. When the last dancer began to dance with the sword the noise of the crowd was very loud. He danced

for a while and then ran for a distance of nearly 3 Kilometers. There in the midst of the field, he stuck the sword into the ground immediately a rope fence of 2 meters radius was put up in that place. Fifteen young men began to dig a well on the spot marked by dancer in trance. The persons who dug the well, had observed ritual prescriptions, had not worn footwears, abstained from meat, had bathed twice a day, and had conjugal continence. They had not cut their hair. The tools like spades, iron rods, buckets used for duging had been kept away from contact.

The young man who digs the well tied their mouths with a cloth to avoid polluting the place by their saliva. The digging began at 10-30 pm. At about 4-30 am the water began to ooze from the well. When people saw the water springing forth they shouted in joy. The diggers came out of well, bowed in reverence to it and covered the well with coconut leaves. If water is found soon it denotes more agricultural production for the ensuing years. If it is late, people believes there would be less agricultural production.

Then they collected water from the newly dug well in 7 mud pots and used it for cooking *prasadam* for the next day. In the 14<sup>th</sup> night they made small globes were placed in a rectangle order near the well. This is the second temporary shrine. The 15<sup>th</sup> day rituals begins at 9 am. A group of people went around the streets to invite people. The *Pambai* music duly accompanied them. At that time people brought a basket filled with coconut, banana and a mud pot decorated with Neem leaves and placed their baskets in front of Perilandavar shrine. When all had gathered, they started moving to the Gauravas shrine and placed their baskets in front of Gauravas.

After this performance they placed the terra cotta horses to the south of Gauravas shrine. Having made vow to their god, they carried these horses on their shoulders. These horses had garlands around their neck. These horses were made to order by the potters of the nearby villages. These potters belong to Velar community. Potters make these horses after observing ritual abstinence for fifteen days. They charged Rs.250 to Rs. 400 for each horses.

In afternoon a ritual called opening the eye of the horse was held. This is nothing but drawing the black portion of the eye which was otherwise wholly painted white. The potters performed this ritual. Coconut, banana, areca nut, lime, dhotis and towel were presented to the potters for performing this ritual.

The horse plays a major role in the worship. When people dance they carry the horse on their head. Water was drawn in seven pots from the newly dug well. Soon after the water was drawn the newly dug well was covered. Young men cooked the fresh rice of newly harvested paddy. The youth who are involved in cooking had tied their mouths with a cloth

in order to avoid polluting. This cooked food served as *annadanam* ( free food).

The ritual of driving away the evil spirit was held at 2-40 pm. This was done in front of a shrine, which is about half a KM to the right of the Gaurava shrine. *Pambai* was performed vehemently and the priest ran at a high speed to the place where devotees possessed by spirits were waiting. He had a garland around his neck and carried a terracotta horse on his shoulder. Two men on either side held the horse from falling. At a specific place about 200 women and few men laid down to the ground.

The priest walked faster here and there. He walked upon the men and women who lay there. This was repeatedly done. When he walked like that some possessed women began to dance. At that time the priest stamp harder upon the possessed women. Once the priest took off his feet, two young men would get hold of their licks and pull there to tamarind tree nearby. There they take a small bunch of their hair, and nail it to the tree. They make three knots and clip off their hair. They believe that the evil spirits go with the hair.

On completion of the ritual 'driving away evil spirit' the ritual of 'whipping' commenced. This was conducted near the Gauravas shrine. Three young men went to the eastern side of the carrying whips. The young men whipped the devotees who come forward with hands rising above their head. The young men beat them rapidly on their hands. Some women were seen massaging their hands being unable to bear the pain. They believed that the evil in them would be removed in that way.

During the course of whipping, other devotees brought their goats to the Gauravas shrine. The goats were made to stand in front of the shrine. Water brought from the shrine was sprinkled upon them. As soon as they shook their heads, heads were cut off. If the goats didn't shake their head it was believed that the deity had not given permission yet.

### **Alihal Festival (festival of eunuchs)**

A festival, which is celebrated by eunuchs, is performed at Koothandavar temple in Koovagam village, Vilupuram district, Northern Tamil Nadu. Eunuchs are locally known as *Alihal*. The festival is celebrated during the full moon day in the Tamil month of *Chiththirai* ( April- May). The *Kaalnathuthal* (erecting a stem) ritual is performed twelve days before the day of full moon. On thirteenth day i.e on the day of full moon, thousands of Eunuchs from various parts of country assembled in this temple to perform the ritual. Wearing *thali* (*mangal suthra*) is one of the important rituals in this celebration. On thirteenth day all the eunuchs are well costumed as brides

and they bring a basket or tray, which contains of fruits, flowers and a yellow thread in which a piece of turmeric tied in the center. This yellow thread is considered as *thali*. They give this basket to the temple priest and pay the fee to the temple priest for tying *thali*. The priest tied *thali* to all the eunuchs. This ritual is performed through out the day.

This ritual is based on the epic Mahabaratha. Pandavas and Gauravas were at war with each other. In order to win the war, a special hero with of thirty-two perfect parts of the body should be sacrificed on a new moon day. There were only two who were such special persons. They are Kannan and Aravan. Knowing this Kannan select Aravan for sacrifice. At that time Aravan asked three demands from Kannan. They are, He want to marry before he is sacrificed, He should be sacrifice by a heroic person and finally he should be die only after watching the entire war. To full fill his first demand Kannan turns himself to be a girl and marries Aravan. Aravan is also known as Koothandavar. The eunuchs believed that they are in the line of Kannan. They believe that the marriage between Koothandavar and Kannan as the marriage that take place between them and Koothandaver. They considered Koothandavar as their husband.

On the night of 13th day *kan thirathal* i.e opening the eyes is performed. A head of Koothandavar is made and kept it in a cart. Then the temple priest draws the black portion of the eye. This is known as *kan thirathal*. After this ritual the head of Koothandavar in a car come around the temple. On 14<sup>th</sup> day morning a grand procession of Koothandavar is performed. During this procession the Eunuchs wear garland on the Koothandavar idol, fire large amount of camphor in front of the cart, claps their hands, sings and dance. As an end of this procession crackers explode the idol of Koothandavar. Then the eunuchs get them severed, break their bangles, they weep and lament as they have lost their husband. Finally all the eunuchs took oil bath in the well and wear white saris and go back to their houses. The festival ends with this.

### **Thookam festival (Hook swinging festival)**

The literal meaning of *Thookam* in Tamil is 'to lift'. *Thookam* festival is celebrated at Pathra Kali Amman temple at Kollankode village in Kanyakumari district. This festival is locally known as *thooka thiruwizha*. This village is in the border region in between Kerela and Tamil Nadu. People in this village speak both Malayalam and Tamil. Patra Kali Amman temple is situated in the center of the village. Two goddesses are worshipped in this temple. They are considered as sisters. The elder is Pathra Kali and the younger is Durga. These goddesses are also known as

Devi and Amman. Every year, a festival is celebrated for ten days during the day of *Bharani* star in the month of *Meenam* (April) according to Malayalam colander. The festival started with the traditional flag hoisting ceremony and a procession was also taken out with decorated elephants. From the day of flag hoisting, devotees from that village and near by villages come to the temple and stay there for ten days. During their stay they observe fasting, take bath in the sea and perform several rituals and exercises every day during morning and evening. Those devotees who are stayed in this temple are known as *thookakar*. These *thookakar* are the persons who perform the *thookam* ritual on the main day of celebration. Core rituals are performed on the day of *Meenam*. On that day, thousands of devotees are assembled in this temple with their children. During the celebration the temple is fully decorated with flowers and leaves. A traditional music called *chenda melam* is performed continuously. A traditional temple cart with four wheels is decorated with flowers and kept in front of the temple. This temple cart is known as *thooka villu*. This cart has two lengthy poles and it is about fifty feet height. This is known as *thooka maram*. Devotees who wish to perform their *nerchai* i.e vow are registered their names and get serial number from the temple administration. The main ritual of this celebration is for children only. In order to full fill the vow of the devotees, the devotees bring their children between the age of three months and one year to the temple and reserve the *thookakar* to lift their children in the cart. Before lifting the children the respective *thookakar* must sacrifice his blood to the deity. In order to collect blood from the *thookakar*, the temple administration arranges some containers in a particular place. Punching with sharp pins at the backside of the *thookakars* collects the blood. The collected blood is mixed with water and stored in the containers and offer to the deity. After this ritual, the *thookakar* are joined at one end of the cart pole with the help of a hook. At a time, four *thookakars* are tied in two poles of the cart. Then the devotees give their children to these *thookakars*. The *thookakars* holds the children in their hands. Then they are lifted up for about fifty feet high. This is known as *thookam*. Then all the devotees pull the cart around the temple and stop it on the starting point. Thousands of children are performed this *thookam* ritual. This performance is held for about 12 hours. Devotees perform this *thooka nerchai* to seek the goddess's blessings for the good health and prosperity of the child.

The above-described festivals are traditionally celebrated in particular region only. Lakhs of devotees are gathered on the particular place on a particular day to take part in the celebration. It gives them opportunity to strengthen their kinship and group solidarity. These festivals are also an important means of economic re distribution. The common element of these

celebrations is the 'rituals'. Different kinds of rituals are performed in different celebrations. Some rituals are the enactment of myths and the people traditionally perform some others. However, the intention of all the rituals is 'thanks giving' and to get opulence and lushness in their life. As folk festivals are the incorporation of several aspects of culture, it serves as a medium for preserve and communicate the 'tradition' to the next generation.

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