Mannan Festivals

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Kalavoottu

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

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

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

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

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

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

Payayil Iruthal: Mourning Ritual of the Mannan Community

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meenoottu: Annual Ritual of the Mannan Community

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pongal Festival in the Mannan Community

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

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

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

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

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

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