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.

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