ORIGINAL ARTICLE

SEA, COMMUNITY AND LANGUAGE: A STUDY ON THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ARABI-MALAYALAM LANGUAGE OF MAPPILA MUSLIMS OF MALABAR.

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Abstract

Mappila Muslim culture is a mixture of Indian and Arabian traditions and its origin can be traced back to pre-Islamic Arabia. There are many references for tracing Mappilas origin into pre Islamic Arabia. It is believed that Arab Merchants travel to Malabar frequently even before Islam emerged in Arabia. Their historical specificity granted them a unique language, culture, religion, and social life. Cultural assimilation was one of the most notable aspect in Mappila history. The marriage of Hindu women to the Arabs historically helped to form a new progeny called Mappila. When Islam was introduced into the Kerala coast, the people who are known as Mappila did not change totally, they did not accept Arabic as their mother tongue and they did not want to give up Malayalam. Instead they invented a new language, Arabi-Malayalam, to community within the community. This new language played an important role in shaping and negotiating Mappila identity. They faced immense crisis of both the identities of Arab and Malayalam. When they faced a crisis to accommodate both into the community and the larger Malabar, Mappila invented a new way to express and share identity. This is Arabi- Malayalam language which was a religious necessity for Mappila. The rich tradition of this community written language reflects a rich history of cultural interactions, as it is a sensitive barometer of social and historical conditions of the Mappila community.

Keywords: Arabi-Malayalam, Mappila, Arabi-Tamil, Malabar, Identity

Introduction

This research is an attempt to understand the origin and development of Arabi-Malayalam language, a hybrid language used by Mappila Muslims of North Malabar in Kerala. In order to understand the evolution of Arabi- Malayalam, I intend to explore how the Mappila Muslims – as a distinct category-historically emerged in the Malabar region. This elaborates further with the questions of innumerable ways in which how this specific identity has been conceived, contested and constructed. Malabar Mappilas are Muslims; however, they are different from the envisaged normative and unique idea of 'Muslims'. Mappila community has derived their own identity through different historical experience and there are forms of multicultural elements, embedded social practices and political economy of the region, which attribute to the realisation of specific Mappila identity. The community has presumed this distinct identity of Mappilas themselves in many ways. It is also true to state that there are many stereotypical symbolisms, which circulates in the popular domain of Kerala society, to identify or imagine the specificity of Mappilas. This includes religiosity, ritual performances, clothing, language, as well as folk and artistic traditions.

This study examines process of how Mappilas have historically emerged and how they are being imagined or identified in a contemporary perspective. Historically, Mappilas were largely merchants and farmers. The Mappila community consisted mainly by lower caste converts, inherent of Arab/Persian merchants and a handful indigenes elite groups, and Sufis from Middle East. In this context, one can pose a question like what are the social, economic and cultural factors, which helped them to realise as a new community. In other words, there are several historical and contemporary factors and its intermediation, which facilitate to the formation of Mappila identity in North Malabar.

The compositeness of various cultural traditions, anxieties, shared spaces, economic interactions and leisure activities infuse to generate set of shared values and meanings that sometimes synchronized with the Muslim selfhood, but quiet often powerfully presents an identity floating within the bounded everydayness of the local culture. It is these shared hybrid practices and colloquial interactions, its political and cultural dialectics and paradoxes can be treated as the constituting elements of this formation. It involves both historical and contemporary factors. Therefore, this study contextualizes both historical and contemporary ruptures and consciousness in order to understand why Mappilas of Malabar intrinsically attach with these cultural legacies, which articulate their own referred identity, instead of radically associate themselves with other Muslim communities in India.

The identity is not only a product of any single historical rupture, rather it was through different cultural practices, ritual and artistic performances, and its circulation and reproduction further enriched the ideal image of Mappila identity within the collective imagination of Kerala society. Parochial language, sartorial patterns, earlier print and its circulation in the region, different ritual and artistic performances, shared social relations and practices are some of the

examples, which become part of the collective imagination of Mappila Identity. These practices, as part of cultural history of Mappilas, inclusively reflect the various facets associated with the everyday life of Mappilas of Malabar. These practices, on the other hand, invariably produced an entrenched notion of distinct Mappila identity and its various process and formulations. These collective practices and its forms (verbal and visual/ritualistic and artistic performance) sometimes directly or indirectly produce powerful expressions and synonymous onto the shared values of Mappila Identity. There are many such forms prevalent among the Mappilas of Malabar.

The Mappila Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

There are several scholarly works which deal history, culture and worldviews of Mappila Muslims. There are many themes, which include history of Mappila, their participation in different social and political movements during the nationalist movements, agrarian structure and different social and religious practices prevailed among them. These works generally function as an informative account sometimes bounded with class analysis. Ronald Miller's book, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends* may be the first of its kinds which brought the community into academic. It describes the history and life of Mappila Muslim till 1970. Much basic information such as the emergence of the new community called Mappila in Malabar with the close connection with Arabs, and their cultural matters are detailed in the book. He wrote that "Mappilas are lying outside of the imagined boundary of Indian Muslims. After 1921, the community was subjugated and terribly suppressed by the British administration, but it led the community to try for political assertion through Muslim League. The 1921 Rebellion was a decisive event in Mappilas live and after it, the community tried alternative ways to unite and thorough education, massive political participation, social welfares and self-reformation Mappila gained a new level of confidence (Miller, 1976)[1]."

Though a number of researchers have produced insightful scholarship on Mappila which include works by Ronald Miller, M Gangadharan, Stephen Dale and others, however, regarding the everyday life of Mappilas, their language, art forms and musical practices got less attention from these academic scholarships. All the studies are mainly confined on the two historical junctures -1921 and Khilafat movement- and its implications, the scholarship have not moved further. These two were, no doubt, the deciding factors of Mappila community and their existence, but the researches are struck in these two junctures make the community less studied in a larger context. Their performance practices, especially rituals are deferent areas of study which have got less attention from the academic circle. There are articles and fictions, but these are mainly confined within the local newspapers and magazine and a great deal of modern Mappila culture is partially self-documenting, via the local mass media. A deeper understanding of them depends upon research, both intensive and extensive, of the many local interpretations of Mappila.

Mappila Rebellion of 1921 and the community's participation in Khilafat Movements are the major events in the history of Mappila Muslims. There are quite few debates on the nature of the Rebellion. F. Dale, in his book *Islamic Society, on the South Asian Frontier: The Mappilas of Malabar, 1498-1922* finds that "the conflict on the Islamic frontier sparked by the Mappilas' intensity felt awareness of themselves as members of a distinct religious community led to the Rebellion" (Dale, 1980). Some historians such as RC Majumdar and Ravindran describe the reasons for the Rebellion as the religious fanaticism of the Mappilas (Dale, 1980). These historians believe that only the religious passion, which is the permanent nature of Mappilas, led them to do the genocidal attempt to non-Muslims. They argue that the Mappila religious heads sparked the religious spirit to run mayhem against the non-Muslims of Malabar. Houtart and Lemecinier, EMS Namboodiripad, KN Panikkar, Conrad Wood has written seminal works on Mappila rebellion and they asses the reason for the Rebellion was agrarian discontent of Mappila Muslims (Namboodiripad, 1943)[2].

Conceptualising Mappila Muslims

There is no common agreement on how and when the term 'Mappila' has emerged, but there are evidences to prove that the term *Mappila* was derived in association with several things such as trade, marital, or a referred pre Islamic identities of the community. It is believed that the name, Mappila, was derived as a title of respect (Miller, 1976)[1] given for Christian in South Kerala and Muslims in north Kerala. In earlier days, Christians were named as Nasrani Mappila and Muslims as Jonaka Mappila (Singh, 2002)[3]. It is a combination of two terms *maha* (great) and *pilla* (son). Arab traders and other mariners were considered as great ones, and gladly received and held in highest respect by the Kings of Kerala. Stephan Frederic Dale, for example, points out:

> "There were economical and political reasons for the kings' dependency on Arabs/ Mappilas. The rulers facilitate the Mappilas' observance of their Friday prayers and the festivals. They designate the stipend for *qadis* and *muadhins*, and entrust them with the duty of carrying out the *sharia* between Muslims. No one is allowed to neglect the Friday prayers (Sheikh Zainuddin Makhdum II, *Tuhfatul Mujahedeen*). Sheikh Zainuddin Makhdum reported that the relations between Muslims and Hindu rulers were characterized 'by an absence of enmity, with rare exceptions'. Local rulers and the Samoothiri especially, had gained much from conciliating Muslims and other merchants, but other the other powerful upper castes did not so immediately benefit from their presence."
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> (Dale, 1980)[4].

During the time of Prophet Muhammad, Islam spread in the Malabar region. The Arab businessmen from Yemen and Hadramout "were the progenitors of some of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar or the *moplas* as they were called in British records. The descendents of these Mappila Muslims were perhaps the first Indian Muslims, much earlier than Muhammad Ibn

Qasim's conquest of Sind (711 – 715) and establishment of permanent Muslim settlement in India".

Local meaning of the term Mappila is to refer the newlywed bridegroom (son-in-law) or husband in a family or locality and also used as descriptive honorific associated with the foreigners who had married the native women. There is another meaning which is related to the nature of the matrilineal inheritance. According to this, Mappila is a term of combination of *ma* (mother) and *pilla* (son) which indicates the Arab traders' marriage relation with the native women of Malabar. In matrilineal circumstances, which were prevailed in Malabar, the children born in this marriage relation between the Arab traders and native women were associated with the women. Both to emphasise that indigenous relationship and to correspond with the usage appropriate to the matriarchal system prevailed among some castes or sects such as Nayars and Tiyyas. Other interpretations of the term Mappila are, *Mahfil*, the Arabic term means the gathering place or meeting place. Malabar was a meeting place of Arab traders, so the people who made relation with Arabs got the term *mahfil*. Another interpretation of the term is, Mappila has been derived from *muflih, maflih* (base is *falah*) which means 'to till'. The noun form is farmer. The Mappilas who lived in the southern part of Malabar were farmers, so they got the title, Mappila. Another interpretation considers that the term Mappila derived from '*muabbar*' (base: *abara*) which means 'one from over the water', *mabar, mubar* was the early name applied by fishermen of the Tamil Nadu area.

Mappilas are always defined as the indigenous Muslim community who are living in five districts (Malappuram, Kozhikode, Palakkad, Kannur and Kasaragode) of Malabar. K.N Panikkar explains 'the Mappilas are the descendants of Arab traders or of Hindu converts to Islam.

There is no single definition available in order to describe the features of the Mappila communities, Scholars have different views and perspectives, Available information suggests; Mappilas are the Malayali Muslims (Dale, 1980)[4]. The other possible definitions are: they are the inland Muslims who are mostly converts from lower castes. Miller says that Mappilas are "those Muslims who are living in the coastal area of Southwest India" (Miller, 1976)[1]. Koya Muhammad describes them as "the progenitors of Arab traders who made marriage relations with the native women of Malabar who belonged to different ethnic communities" (Koya, 1983)[6]. These definitions show that there are many elements associated with the term Mappila; they are geographic, religious, heterogeneous nature in general. The merging of different kinds of heterogeneous subjects (Arab traders, Sufis, lower caste converts, inland farmers, priests, and others) into a broader category called 'Mappila' which created a new form of community identity.

This new category, 'Mappila' got a space between the essentialist understanding of Islam and Hindu. Scholars like Shahil Mayaram termed this new identity as liminal. Mayaram, in her book, *Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory, and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity*, observes.

Liminality is used as a short hand for the intermediary whether in the form of bridges, gates, doorways, bodies or social margins. These liminal or intermediary locations are points of intersection between the natural and the cultural, outer and inner, private and public, dominant and subordinate, and between theological discourses. Although conceptually seductive, I am not sure that liminality avoids being premised upon a binary formulation; to be betwixt and between after all does presume monition ontology of poles. Besides the liminal (whether as rite, status reversal our cultural) seems to be nearly transitional; a dianession punctuation (Mayaram, 1997)[7].

Liminality suggests a preferred state of being their blurry identities, which are in between, and outside conventional categories, is deliberately cultivated and maintained. It comes from the marginal peripheral worlds were categorical identities and sectarian difference are caricatured. My primary assumption is that Mappila Muslims need to be understood as a separate entity, which is different from the usual categorization of 'The Muslim'. If the identity of Mappila merges with the vast homogenous category of Muslim, it reduces the distinct community nature of Mappila and will essentialize this identity into a wider Muslim fold.

According to the available sources, Mappilas are the indigenous community, and in practice they were not a fundamental Muslim community by practice, however it was community which formed by the interactions, intermingling and intermarriage of the Arab, Persian merchants and the natives. The settlements of Arab merchant that have been carrying on trade in India since pre-Islamic times cemented and strengthened the marital union with native Hindu women resulted to the formation of community. In short, Mappila Muslims came into existence through the marriage of local women to Arab sailors and traders. The native rulers extended all facilities and protection to them because their presence was needed to the economic prosperity of the rajas. The sea has been the permanent and decisive factor in the history of Kerala. Such religion as Judaism, Christianity and Islam come to Kerala by sea. The recorded history of trade between west Asia and Malabar may be traced back as Phoenician times. In the course of time Malayali developed their own culture, in the process extensively absorbing Aryan elements from the north, as well as Arab and European elements from the west. Their influences affected most noticeably the language and religion of the Malayali. All the Semitic religions reached in Kerala just after these were formed. For example, Christianity reached in Kerala in AD 68 by St. Thomas. Some studies also identify the historicity of Mappila as a pre-Islamic one. This is very important to understand that Mappila community was formed before the advent of Islam in Arabia. There are myths and legends, which assume Mappila community was formed early before the first Muslim arrived in Kerala. The myth of Vararuchi, a Brahmanan Scholar in the King Vikramaadithyan's court, (around 300 AD) highly learned in all the Saasthrams (sciences), for instant, tells the earlier existence of Mappila/Muslim presence. The story which was given in a Brahmin community website does not make a difference between Mappila and Muslim, though the time frame of the story is much earlier before Islam was introduced in Arabia by the Prophet Muhammad. The story is believed to be happened in AD 300 and Islam existed in Arabia only in AD 600. Vararuchi said to be the son of famous Govinda Swamy and the author of Vaakiam and

Paralpperu, two treatises in Jyothissaasthram (Astronomy), both of which were then popular in the Kerala region. One of his deserted sons was a Mappila who was named as Uppukottan. Uppukottan, who was raised as a 'Muslim', was born in Ponnani at the mouth of the Nila River. He was a crazy trader, mainly in salt and cotton, who used to bring salt, which is so common in Ponnani, from Palakkad, and take cotton to Palakkad, which is common there. Here the story is equated with Mappila's profession and geographical location also. (http://www.namboothiri.com/articles/agnihothri.htm accessed on 13/11/12 and according to another legend, Ouwayi, who through extreme devotion, made the goddess of Kozhikode to appear before him, was a Jonaka Mappila. Since the pre- Islamic Arabs were idolaters, many of their practices might have crept into Malabar. Mappilas are always understood as a larger Muslim community. It compels the researchers to merge the Mappila identity with the larger Muslim identity. An attempt to locate Mappila in a more independent terrain, which is free from the binary classification, may help understanding the community well. It challenges the theoretical topography based on the binary categories, 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' and suggest an alternative concept of liminal identity.

In a time when the Mappilas were educationally very backward, the community used mappilappaattu to impart religious knowledge (Kutty, 2014)[8]. Based on cultural theories on social values, the scholarship argues "that knowledge evolves within a culture and each culture places value on the different aspects of intelligence that inform expressions of intellectual processes. This intellectual process constitutes consciously held knowledge, skills and ways of thinking or more simply put, cultural knowledge structures" (Paechter & Carrie. (2001)[9]. From the beginning, when mappilappaattu were written down, the primary function of the song was to partake the religious knowledge among them. Special attention was devoted to the multiple roles played by mappilappaattu in this complex relationship to share the religious knowledge. Earlier mappilappaattu got a wider connotation rather than just songs for entertainment. But today, in the present scenario, mappilappaattu is in a serious threat in the way of partaking knowledge when new technologies and movements are introduced in the community, hence the community considers it more than a song. For example, When Islam was introduced into the Kerala coast, they had a new language to communicate with the people and it eventually helped in introducing Arabi Malayalam.

Origin and Development of Arabi – Malayalam Language

When Islam was introduced, the people of Malabar had two ways- one was to go with the Arabic language and change totally, similar to what the Anglo Indians did, when Christianity was introduced in Kerala Coast. Anglo Indians totally accepted the British way and changed totally. But when Islam was introduced into the Kerala coast, the people who were known as Mappila did not change totally. They did not accept Arabic as their mother tongue nor did they give up Malayalam (Aboobakkar, 2014)[10]. Instead they invented a new language, Arabi-Malayalam, to communicate within the community. Mappilappaattu, in beginning, was written in Arabi-

Malayalam language. This new language played an important role in shaping and negotiating Mappila identity. Mappilas believed themselves to be the progenitors of Arab fathers and local Malabar women (Singh & Khan, 2000)[3]. They faced immense crisis of both the identities of Arab and Malayalam. When they faced a crisis to accommodate their dual identities into the community and the larger Malabar, the Mappilas invented a new way to express and share this identity. This became possible with the Arabi- Malayalam language which in the course of time became a religious necessity for Mappila (Puvvakkurushi, 2000) and literary scholars of Malayalam consider it as another '*manipravalam*', for example, APP Namputhiri says that the songs which were produced in Arabi Malayalam are far better than the works done in Manipravalam in its structure, style and aestheticism (Namputhiri, 2014)[2]. Commenting on the Arabi-Malayalam language Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella opine that "in sum, there is generally a strong Arabic thread running through Kerala Muslim culture, especially marked in Malabar and reinforced by the extensive post 1970s migration to the gulf" (Osella and Osella, 2013)[5]". The language was a "dialect the Muslim invented for the purpose of communication" (Sakkariya & Skariya, 2007)[11]. was used as a tool for sharing knowledge among them. Arabi-Malayalam, which was "an important aspect of Muslim assimilation in Kerala", (Kurup & Ismail., 2008)[12]. is a combination of different languages mainly Arabic, Malayalam and Persian (Minahan, 2012)[13]. The first novel written in Kerala was not 'Indulekha' (1889), but it was 'Chardarvesh' (1883), which was published 6 years prior to the publication of Indulekha. In the latest book on Indian Muslims, Julten Abdelhalim discusses the importance of Arabi Malayalam in Mappila's social life. He further states that the first novel in Malayalam was written in Arabi-Malayalam (Abdelhalim, 2016)[14]. Not only books, but monthlys and even dailies were published using Arabi Malayalam. *Nisa ul Islam* was a women magazine published in Arabi- Malayalam and *Al Muslim*, published by Vakkom Abdul Khader Mulavi was a daily written in Arabi Malayama (Shamsudheen, 2014)[15]. Many think that, the formation of this new language was due to the fear inherent in Mappilas, whether Malayalam language would force them to deviate from their religious tract, and so they devised Arabi Malayalam language (Kochangadi, 1998)[16]. The formation of mappilappaattu has certain necessities such as Mappila became a society and there was a situation that the knowledge about the rituals and practices had to be spread among the ordinary Mappila folks. It's very important that Mappila community used an innovative way to educate themselves when most of the members were not accessible to the mainstream education system for various reasons. Here they use the song for producing knowledge. Songs were used for educating the community specifically for teaching religious lessons. In such a scenario, Mappila invented a new language called Arabia-Malayalam. Just after Arab- Malayalam language was formed, mappilappaattu also started to evolve.

Arabi Malayalam has its literary tradition and Mappilappaattu is the poems of it and Scholars such as Shamshad Hussein opine that "Arabic Malayalam emerged as a progressive language when the Ulama stood against studying Malayalam" (Abdelhalim, 2016)[14]. Arabi Malayalam believed to be existed in Malabar by 9th or 10th century. Some scholars like CK Kareem think that Arabi Malayalam is the result of Arab missionaries to Malabar thought of

forming languages to convey the message of Islam in a better way to the people. Mappilappaattu denotes the poetry section of Arabi Malayalam literature (Ahmed, 2010)[17].

There are instances in history, where the community was totally dependent on Arabi – Malayalam and its poetic form, mappilappaattu to spread education in the society. Here we need to pay considerable attention to documenting and reviving Indigenous Knowledge and to legitimizing it from the perspective of mainstream culture and western scientific knowledge; however, western science has not considered music as part of this emerging field of study. Mappilas, from the beginning kept an anti colonial mind for various reasons. This was due to the result of the revolt of 1921. They opposed everything which British introduced. There were *fatwas* from the religious authority in using English and their dress style. The *Ulama* of the community decreed English as the language of hell. The community utilized the possibilities of Arabi-Malayalam when the members of the community largely were forced to turn off their faces from the modern education introduced by the British English education and the mainstream Malayalam education. The new language was formed to express their idea among the community. Apart from Arabi Malayalam, Mappilas also created some secret languages such as '*maikurud*' and '*akkakkettu*'. 'Akkakkettu' is a secret language which was used to convey messages when riots were widespread in the Malabar region with the arrival of Portuguese (Kutty, 2014[18] & Kochangadi, 1998[16]).

The priest used Arabi-Malayalam to partake religious knowledge to them (Kutty, 2014)[18]. Today Mappila community believes that they were educated and literate when they invented their own language which was different from Malayalam and Arabic. When Mappila was integrated to the Kerala state, they were forced to learn pure Malayalam and forced to brush off their own language. The rejection of Arabi- Malayalam language ultimately branded the community as illiterate though they were masters in Arabi – Malayalam once, as Julten Abdelhalim opines:

> "after the Mappila Revolt, the destiny of Arabi-Malayalam was its overnight semi-death. A backwardness discourse erupted when modern education took over violently, and Muslims were called illiterates overnight. The Muslims' ignorance of the English language pulled them back from modernization"
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> (Abdelhalim, 2016)[14].

Mappilappattu acted as a language to transmitting culture, for culture is "transmitted through medium of teaching and intercourse and through the material products of culture such as songs" (Kirkpatrick, 1981)[19] in short, the community used mappilappaattu for knowledge production. *Oppana*, another performance of Mappilas which employed mappilappaattu for example, was more associated with festivities of Mappila Muslims such as wedding, ear piercing ceremony, head tonsuring ceremony, circumcision ceremony, and bath after the 40 days of delivery. The main function of *Oppana* is to help the newlywed couple to get rid of their shyness, to reduce the fear of male children during circumcision and for baby girls, while

piercing their ear. The belief is that the movement of the body parts such as hands, waist, and legs distracts them from any fear or shyness (Puvvakkurushi & Hydros, 2000)[20].

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