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Interrogating the Past and the Present: Politics of Mappila Arts and Cultural Traditions in Kerala

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The Muslims of Kerala have traditions of cultural and artistic performances and they have been preserved and performed and are broadly placed under the rubric of Mappila culture or Mappila artistic forms. The Sweeping rush of different media has helped these art forms to shrug off religious connotations and come out with zeal to merge with other mainstream cultural forms. Though these art forms are widely performed and popularized more than ever before due to multiple developments in terms of viewership and technology it is heartening to see the public opinion often declining to perceive that as a mainstream Kerala art form. My contention is that the tagging of “Mappila” always makes these art forms to be relegated from other forms of mainstream Kerala cultural and artistic forms.

The Muslims of Kerala like other communities have traditions of cultural and artistic performances such as *Mappilappattu*, *Oppana*, *Arabanamuttu*, and *Kolkkali*. These have been preserved and performed for years with religious zeal and colour, and are broadly placed under the rubric of Muslim culture or Muslim artistic forms. The recent mushrooming of different media has helped these art forms to shrug off religious connotations and come out with zeal to merge with other mainstream cultural forms. The Mappila art forms, in recent times, are widely performed and popularized more than ever before. Moreover, the inclusion of these cultural forms in the school festivals which have been considered a “standard” melting point of diverse cultural and art forms of Kerala, gives hope for their popularity in future. Programmes like *Mailanchi Season* on Asianet TV, *Kasavu Thattam* on Amrita TV, and *Patturummal* on Kairali TV have helped in taking these cultural/artistic forms beyond the confines of religion, although these programmes sometimes tend to spoil the so-called “purity” of Mappilappattu. Since the programmes have been conceived to cater to the taste of the audience, we cannot deny that they have given these art forms an opportunity to enter mainstream culture and become more visible. It is laudable that recently, on August 2013, the students of Udinoor G.H.S.S performed an Oppana with 121 members and found a place for themselves in the Guinness world record.

Though the Mappila culture includes tales, ballads, songs and local life styles which evolved through native and immigrant cultures, taken as a whole, it fostered unity and oneness among people, particularly in peasant societies. The culture was founded on a continuous and concrete set of beliefs and ideals. It arose as an Islamized form of the local traditions of peasants and was practiced with vibrant zeal by the converted people. The peasant uprisings in Malabar also followed a set of informal rules. The Mappila, who hitherto followed a peaceful and adaptive culture, donned a militaristic robe when colonial powers began to interfere with their freedom and culture. At a time when other peasant communities

in the region followed a submissive attitude towards the colonial invaders, the Mappila peasants headed by their spiritual leaders took up arms against their oppressors. The zeal to join the struggles prompted the non-Mappila peasants to convert *en masse* into the fold of Islam and this accelerated the cultural synthesis of the Mappila tradition in Malabar. The local cultural elements found a firm root in the Islamic resurgence of the community.

The evolution of Mappila songs, known generally as *Mappilappattu* was the result of the evolution of the Mappila peasant society into a distinct community through a synthesizing of local traditions with that of the Islamic variants. The rural tales and Islamic stories are beautifully amalgamated in Mappila songs so as to present an Islamic culture suitable to the peasant life of the area. Since the Islamic preaching among the peasant communities was mainly carried out by migrants from Tamil Nadu like the Makhdums and the Marakkayars, there was ample opportunity to import Tamil Muslim styles into the Malabar. Tamil styles had a great impact upon Mappila literature, particularly on Mappila songs. Many poets including Mahakavi Moyin Kutty, and scholars went to Tamil Nadu to study the Tamil Muslim songs of the poets called Pulavars. The Mappila battle songs are also modeled after Tamil Muslim styles. The first known Mappila war song *Zaqqoom Padappattu* was an Arabic-Malayalam translation of *Zakkoon Padayppor* composed by Varishay Muhiyudheen Poolavar of Madurai in 1686. Alim Umar Labba, a Mappila religious scholar from Kayalpattanam translated it into Arabi-Malayalam in 1836.

However, the war-songs became popular with the commencement of anti-colonial struggles against the British, and Moyin Kutty Viaydar who lived during this period was responsible for this occurrence. The war-song on the Islamic struggle of Badr which took place in 634 AD was the first of its kind composed by Moyin Kutty in 1876. He composed songs on Islamic as well as local battles and this was followed by others. Composing war-songs in the local dialect was considered sacred since it inspired jihad against the colonialists. The songs became famous so much so that their narration was a common practice in the Mappila centers during the outbreaks. The genre continued producing varieties of songs related to different subjects all of which were based on the theme of the life of the Prophet, his wives, the Sahaba and Sufi saints who reached India to preach Islam, their personal and community life, and their struggles to uphold and spread Islam.

When we analyze the alterations in subject matter that have occurred in Mappila songs at different times through history, one of the interesting things noted is that they often reflect the life-worlds of the Muslim community. They throw light upon the socio-economic conditions of the Malabar Muslims as well as their cultural awareness and religious consciousness. This can easily be found in the songs of the 1970s when the main subject was the angst of the migrants, their feelings, thoughts and dreams. The *Kathupattu* (the letter songs) that were prevalent at that point in time can be seen as a mirror of Muslim social life during that time. These letter songs are in the form of a letter which was one of the principal means of communication between the migrants and the relatives before the arrival of the telephone. These songs are still a repository of information that throws light on the as yet unknown areas of their social and familial lives. Besides, they remain a testimony to the

elevated imaginations of these people. Apart from reminiscences and nostalgia that are abundant in the case of educated or well-settled migrants in developed countries, these songs exhibit the unending trauma of the illiterate and poor people who are destined to leave their families and endure anguish in the deserts of Arabia.

Later, with factionalism raising its head between different Islamic organizations, powerful attempts were taken to promote Islamic culture and rituals, and Mappilappattu was adopted as the mode to transmit different Islamic teachings. This paved the way for the emergence of Islamic devotional songs that praise the Almighty in multiple ways. Thus this musical genre broke free of the general rules and principles that framed the composition of these particular kinds of songs. The “Album Songs” that was immensely successful in the recent past in Kerala borrowed the tunes of Mappilappattu, simultaneously giving it a fresh lease of life, an opportunity to venture outside the bounds of religious connotations. Later, even cinema songs started to adapt the tone and tastes of these songs. The song *Kayalarikath Vala Yernijappo Vala Kilukkiya Sundaree* in the movie *Neelakkuyil* (1954) is one of the famous songs that marks the beginning of this genre in the public.

Despite the evolution of Mappilappattu through different stages in time, there are questions raised from certain quarters about the discrimination these forms face in the modern world. At this juncture, it will be interesting to look at how art forms can be appreciated and secularized in order to create a space of social harmony. First of all, there is the important question of whether one can think about the secularization of religious art forms at all. If the answer is yes, why cannot the Mappila art forms enter mainstream culture? What are the obstacles in this regard? A related aspect in this case would be the meaning of the term “secular”? Why it is that only art forms belonging to dominant religions in prominent positions within mainstream culture? Why is it that only certain art forms have been given the status of “Kerala” or “Malayali” culture? The business of critiquing the nostalgia for purity is relevant here, especially since it is an accepted fact that art forms have their own aesthetic value and charm irrespective of religious, regional or linguistic connotations.

It is in this context that the articulations of the Mappila Muslim identity, starting with the public sphere of colonial Malabar, especially after the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 are examined here. The colonial history of the public sphere in Malabar serves as backdrop to a better understanding of the construction of present-day Muslim identity in Kerala in terms of power and domination. It shows that a Muslim community that rebelled against the colonial state in northern Kerala came to be seen as aggressive, uncivilized, fanatical, and even today is a target of resentment and distrust, even while the memory of their subalternity still remains with them. Under the circumstances it is not surprising that Mappila culture or Mappila artistic forms came to be viewed with curiosity as the “Other,” and marks the point of departure from which to view events in a different light.

The memory of being an “Other” continues to carry contemporary relevance. Folk literature can in one sense claim to be the oldest surviving genre of literature in the

Malayalam language, but it has until very recent times existed only as oral tradition. Its historical importance is that it links present day written literature to the Dravidian roots of the language. Thus the oral literature of Kerala provides a narrative of the unbroken tradition of different communities based on the social realities of the life of people of all castes and ranks. The Mappila Muslims of the Western coast in the Malabar region of Kerala maintained their own folk culture and tradition which was an admixture of local and Persian-Arab traditions. This is why the Mappila literature and folk culture diverge from the local culture prevailing in Kerala. The cultural sphere is less frequently interpreted alongside social and political arenas, but what is certain is that it is in popular culture that we see both the potential for integration and some of the most vivid examples of prejudice and xenophobia.

The commission of the Government of India reported the continuing difficulties faced by Indian Muslims in a report titled "Social, Economic, and Educational Status of the Muslim," which was released in November 2006. The Sachar Committee Report after reporting the widespread inequality which Muslims face, describes Indian Muslims as carrying the "double burden of being labeled as 'anti-national' and as being 'appeased' at the same time" (Sachar:3). While Muslims need to prove on a daily basis that they are not "anti-national" and "terrorists," it is not recognized that the alleged "appeasement" has not resulted in the desired level of socio-economic development. Blamed by some for the Partition, the ongoing dispute in Kashmir, and the occasional terrorism, Indian Muslims feel caught between the politics of suspicion and exceptionalism – a position many find uncomfortable. This happens because Indian secularism refers not to the separation of religion and state but to the equality of distribution of state services to all religious communities within the polity. The term secularism signifies something akin to pluralism or multiculturalism elsewhere. As Partha Chatterjee points out, there is a deep contradiction in the fact that India's ruling elite have historically been involved in supporting and regulating religious institutions even while the Constitution declared the importance of separating religion and politics as fundamental to the polity (278).

The notion of the public sphere as been mentioned above has been widely seen as an appropriate descriptive tool to understand the formations and transformations of community identities in modern socio-political conditions. The term was introduced by Habermas who considered the public sphere as a domain of common concern and a space for critical debate, which was inclusive in nature (1). The public sphere is a social space of communication, perceived somewhat idealistically, it now seems, where citizens deliberate upon their common affairs in the institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. Free and equal individuals meet to debate issues of common concern, arriving thereby at a normatively binding public opinion. The original formulation of the public sphere thereby implies that the presence of religion will gradually diminish in the public sphere simultaneous with the development of rationality and individualism in modern societies (Habermas 2). But a mixture of recent incidents, whether global or local, national or international, indicates that the crisis of the modern State lies in its failure to complete the agenda of secularizing society. In other words, the pathology of "unfinished projects of modernity" leads to the assertion of communities of faith or religious groups. This view still belongs, at a theoretical level, to the

discourse of modern, secular European self-representation. It clearly ignores the complexities of non-Western societies and their integrated perspectives about the place of religion (Punathil: 11).

Taking the example of the Mappila Muslims of Kerala, they create and reflect counter public spaces through parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, asserting their identities, interests and needs. The public sphere of Kerala was never free from either the involvement of religion or the influence of caste, whether in the colonial period or in later periods. There is a history of caste and religious assertion in the colonial period, inspired by Enlightenment modernity and this was one of the foundations of social development in Kerala. The colonial period was a significant phase when communities acquired a new role in the public sphere, though hardly in a neutral manner. In addition, region becomes an important additional factor in understanding the history of communities.

Any attempt to study communities in a given region necessitates an insight into the specific social history of that region. In this sense, colonial Kerala can be certainly seen as a historical, cultural, linguistic and structural entity that constitutes the confluence of communities. Within this region, the Malabar presents its own specificities of community conglomerations in the colonial period (Krishna:79). The participation of communities in the public sphere has clearly something to do with the discourse of caste as well as religious groups. The literature about the social history of Kerala provides rich evidence of the interpenetration of caste and religion in the public sphere (Aloysius: 28). The elucidation of the nature of the linkage between caste and religion is significant in locating Mappila Muslims in colonial Malabar. All the factors that consolidated community identities under colonial modernity, like colonial administrative practices, introduction of various laws regarding communities, print culture, and emergence of reformist leaders, caste associations and Christian missionary activities helped these groups form into political communities in a more or less similar fashion. What makes the history of Mappila Muslims unique and complex is their local experience of marginality and resistance in relation to the socio-political processes under colonial rule.

While reformism, lived Islam and stratification within the community have dominated the public discourse of modern Kerala, especially within the domains of Muslim life, issues such as power and politics, state and citizenship, identity and marginality have not been brought sufficiently into the picture. Recently, scholars have started to talk about Muslims, either in terms of pan-Islamism and textual Islam, or in terms of lived Islam and cultural diversity. The movements against the colonial state that shaped “Malayali” Muslim identity in Kerala, particularly in Malabar, tell us that there is a need to approach history by contextualizing such communities in their specific terrains of power and politics.

The term Mappila is derived from the word *Maha-pilla* meaning “big-child,” a title of honor conferred on immigrants; but there are many other interpretations also for the term “Mappila” (Kunju:35). Unlike in the North of India where Islam arrived through conquest, in

Kerala the spread of Islam was mainly through trade by Arab merchants and the gradual conversion of natives to Islam (Miller:79). The knife known as Malappuram knife, head-tonsuring, eating from a common plate, tying a scarf round the head and wearing a *topi* were all cultural markers of Mappila Muslims. While the origin of the Muslim struggles in Kerala goes back to trade conflicts with the Portuguese, local uprisings started during the nineteenth century when the subordination and oppression of Mappila, a historically oppressed social group in the feudal agrarian social structure of Malabar, by British administrators and local landlords became ever more severe.

In the context of colonial Malabar, for the Mappila Muslims, religion was certainly not something separable from public life. When they engaged with the public in the form of resistance and conflict, religion was intrinsically tied up with their thoughts and actions. The religious character of the Mappilas was depicted as something dangerous by the colonizers, as their religion had always been a perceived threat to colonial power. Hence the colonizers constantly, and in all possible ways, tried to relegate the Mappilas' religion to the private sphere.

M. T. Ansari discusses how Muslims were identified in colonial writings before and after the rebellion. He argues that in colonial writings, Mappila Muslims were firmly fixed within the frame of religion (Ansari:39). The categories, through which the Mappilas might be identified, such as peasant, working class and lower caste, are overwritten by an emphasis on religion. Ansari confirms that many of the colonial writings constructed the Muslim as "fanatic," "barbaric" and "ignorant" (Ansari:39). Blatantly racist attitudes found a place even in judicial verdicts.

Since the Muslims constantly threatened colonial interests, the latter consciously tried to project Muslims as uncivilized and reiterated the need to control Mappila bodies and minds. The "fanatic" was administered as a construct deployed by the colonial administrator for the political control of Mappila Muslims (Ansari: 41). Apart from the colonizers, nationalist leaders, including Gandhi and other prominent voices in Kerala, reaffirmed colonial notions about Muslims through their speeches and activities. The celebrated nationalist poet in Kerala, Kumaran Asan (2004 [1923]:32) in his poem "*Durvastha*" refers to Kerala being reddened with Hindu blood "shed by the cruel Muhammadans".

Discursive and institutional practices that constructed the identity of Mappila Muslims and reaffirmed notions of them as the "Other," were also articulated in mainstream newspapers and magazines of that time. Such constructions formed the Mappila political identity while the "community" acquired a new meaning in the public sphere. After the 1921 Rebellion, Mappila Muslims were further marginalized from the public sphere which was dominated by nationalist elites in Kerala (Hitchcock 56).

Serious discussions about the condition of Muslims as a minority in the post-independent public sphere have occupied academic discourses. The Partition crisis and the endemic communal violence in various parts of India have had serious repercussions. Javed

Alam writes: “Common sufferings in communal riots bring Muslims together just as economic strangulation unites tribes, or the evils of untouchability unites Dalits, or gender humiliation unites women, all in common political action generating a sense of bonding” (Alam:48). While such political issues have generated a common consciousness among Muslims, recent terrorist attacks and the further labeling of Muslims as terrorists have only added to the woes of Indian Muslims. There is a sense of “otherness” to Muslims as the imagined other, essentialized as “child breeders,” “dirty,” “violent,” “fundamentalist,” “sinister-looking,” “poor,” “illiterate” and so on (Hasan: 8)

The Sachar Committee Report highlights major issues around the question of identity for Indian Muslims and the modalities of being identified as “Muslim” in public spaces (Sachar 2006: 11–13). Markers of Muslim identity like the *burqa* and the *purdah* have often been a target for ridiculing the community and generating suspicion. The report reveals that Muslim men donning a beard and *topi* are often picked up for interrogation from public spaces like parks, railway stations and markets. As the report rightly points out, Muslims “carry a double burden of being labeled as ‘anti-national’ and as being ‘appeased’ at the same time” (Sachar 2006: 11)

The history of Mappila Muslims demonstrates their subaltern dimension in colonial Kerala. Mappila marginalization can be seen to result partly from their position as a historically subaltern group like other caste groups, and partly as a religious community. After the rebellion of 1921, there was a rupture in the social life of the Mappilas and their colonial projection and negative labeling as “fanatical” had major impact on the public sphere, which restricted the community’s interaction and involvement with the wider public. Although the Muslims of Malabar are no more a subaltern community and show a unique history of social development compared to their counterparts elsewhere in the country, the stereotypes and stigmas surrounding their religious identity continue to persist in the public sphere even today, often in new forms.

The migration from the Malabar to Middle-Eastern countries has led to the formation of a prominent body of Diaspora and to the creation of consequent changes in cultural practices. The considerable economic successes enjoyed by the diasporic Malabarees have made them receptive to technologies of the digital age. The new modes of information exchange made possible by electronic media have diminished the distance between their homes and the outside world eventually reflected in both the public and private spheres of Mappila Muslims. This in turn has helped in bringing Mappila art forms into the forefront of mainstream art and cultural discourses.

Having agreed that the emergence of multi-faceted media and especially social media has been helping a lot for coming of Mappila art forms out of the confined boundaries they had been kept in, it is heartening to see the public opinion sometimes inclining to see that as a pure Kerala art as it sees Kathakali, Thiruvathira etc. My contention is that the tagging of “Mappila” always makes these art forms to be relegated from other forms of mainstream Kerala cultural and artistic forms. The last incident that happened during Kerala Youth

Festival (2013) in Palakkad district of Kerala exemplifies this notion of viewing Malappuram or something that is related to Malappuram as “other”. Some students who became late for drama competition were behaved very badly by the police; the latter asked the students that whether they were from Malappuram? This kind of “state apparatus” (Althusser: 77) that includes the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc. always seem to be repressing this “other” forever. The persistent endeavors of certain sections of Mappila community to take their cultural assets beyond the parameters of their religious boundaries have been acting as a catalyst in this journey forward.

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