



FOLK SAYINGS TRADITION OF MUSLIM COMMUNITY: A FOLKLORIC ANALYSIS BASED ON MALABAR REGION IN KERALA

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Abstract:

*Tradition is always important when approaching a culture and is an opening for present studies. Kerala's long tradition of global relations has created a rich cultural tradition. This leads to a peculiar culture and special social integrity, which is standing as a different scene from the pan-Indian style. The earliest global Arab relations towards Kerala made the Muslim culture a different affair compared to pan-Indian Muslims. A mixed tradition of Arab and Dravidian patterns created a peculiar cultural background for the community. This can be seen in their customs, performances, rituals, sayings, **paattu** traditions, etc. The present study discusses the vernacular folk-saying tradition of Muslims in the Malabar region of Kerala. Both historical and anthropological methods were adopted for this study. The core ideas trying to explore are folkloric analysis of the unique saying tradition and how the tradition has been transmitted from generations and used in daily life while living in a mixed society. How have Arabic and trans-regional connections influenced the community? and influence of the vernacular Arabi-Malayalam language in the Saying tradition..*

Keywords: Folk Sayings Tradition, Proverb, Proverbial Phrase, Arabi-Malayalam, Mappila community, Malbar, Kerala.

INTRODUCTION

The nation of India is well known for its immense cultural diversity and interrelationships among communities in the early period itself. Like the same story in South India, specifically in Kerala, from the pre-colonial period itself. Different from the pan-Indian trans-regional connections, Kerala has its own

trans-regional connections worldwide and is the land of the earliest international relations in India. Like Arab and Chinese relations. This oceanic relation of 'Kerala region'¹specifically, Malabar coast, made

¹ Kerala is a region on the Malabar coast of India, officially named as such on November 1, 1956.

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this land rich in cultural background. Most of these global relations were based on trade and religious propagation. The spice trade in Kerala was famous globally and was known as the Malabar² region of South Asia. Arabs, Christians, and Jews from different parts of the world have deep roots in Kerala. These strong cultural and historical backgrounds made a place rich in blended tradition. Different communities listed under the Hindu religion, Muslims, Christians, tribes and Jews in less number are there in Kerala. From this, it is clear how diverse the social structure has been in this small region. And a 'land' with great part sharing with the coast was always attracted by travelers, traders, and even colonizers.

Different communities in Kerala have their own cultural and religious traditions. Whereas general social life patterns like food, dressing, and marital relations are almost the same, mixed social life has influenced immensely in each community's folklore. Even though this influence can be seen in Muslim folklore, a peculiar tradition followed by them always stands out from others. Muslims in Kerala have a long tradition in the land. As per local tradition, Islam has reached 'the Malabar coast' (now in Kerala state, which was known as the Malabar Coast itself earlier), as early as 'After the

Prophet Muhammad's successful preaching, they came to Kerala's shores as the followers of Islam.'³ This means that at least in CE 632, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, there were Muslims in Kerala. There are opinions that, even before the Prophet's age, there were Muslim settlements in south India. The connection of the Mappila community with Arabia, Persia, and other different places created a different mix of culture among Kerala Muslims. As a result of local development, they developed the Arabi-Malayalam language. Arabi-Malayalam is a Dravidian language written in Arabic and read as Malayalam. Arabic, Malayalam, Persian, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, and even Sanskrit are included in this indigenous language. And even before the Malayalam language was in use, this vernacular language was used among Muslims.

Muslims in this region were called *Mappilas*. The term is a combination of two Malayalam words: *maha* (great) and *pilla* (child). The phrase "great child" was a respectful synonym for son-in-law and is still so utilized in contemporary colloquial Malayalam.⁴ This term was also used for Christians, with the same denotations as above. A core idea of the study is focused on the influence of indigenous Arabi-Malayalam, or a mix of

² Malabar is a region of the south-western shoreline of India, presently in Kerala state, including Kasargod, Kannur, Wayanad, Kozhikode, Malappuram, and Palakkad districts.

³ Miller, Roland E. (2015). *Mappila Muslim culture: how a historic Muslim community in India has blended tradition and modernity*, State University of New York Press.

⁴ Ibid,

Dravidian and trans-regional languages, in the folkloric tradition. This uniqueness is trying to be explored in the study by examining the 'folkloric saying tradition' of proverbs and proverbial phrases and the peculiar slang style of the community, with a special focus on the Malabar region. It is not possible to include all angles and details of the saying tradition of a community; here, it tries to introduce uniqueness and regionality.

Folklore studies comprise all angles of life, and as it shows, the 'folk and lore' is so inclusive all about a folk or group. The unclarity on the definition of folklore is still undergoing. But a more recent approach is focused on the 'performers of the community' and 'what is meant for them' about their culture, daily life activities, culture, rituals, initial rites, words, views, etc. That is, from the post-colonial approach, scholars from the regional lands now try to approach the decolonial method. And they try to say what they feel about themselves. The folk in the folklore also have different opinions. The major accepted pattern introduced by Alan Dundes is that "folk is a flexible concept that can refer to a nation, as in American folklore, or to a single family"⁵. Dundes also describes that "folk" can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor⁶.

⁵ Dundes, Alan (1969). The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory. *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 6 (1): 5–19.

⁶ Ibid,

Generally, folklore is categorized into three categories: oral lore, material lore, and customary lore. Also described as "things people make with words (verbal lore), things they make with their hands (material lore), and things they make with their actions (customary lore)"⁷. Even though these categorizations are criticized and more developed, here they are merely used to get an overview. Verbal lore or oral folklore, folk narratives, or verbal art are some other terms used for folk expressions used by words in a broad sense. Some scholars include storytelling, proverbs, riddles, tales, myths, legends, folk speech, folk sayings, slang, and even many more.

METHODOLOGY

Even though there are historical, social, and some anthropological studies on the community, a serious cultural or folkloristic study detailing the indigenous tradition is still lacking in the field. As a core part of folkloristics, the fieldwork ethnography method is followed primarily. By giving a special focus on the Malabar region of Kerala. And also used secondary sources, even though they were very few in content, including digital platforms for collecting data. The study also tries to approach a historical and cultural anthropological method. Which gives a more detailed look into the tradition and how they have approached it.

⁷ Wilson, William A. Rudy, Jill Terry, and Call, Diane. (Ed.) (2006). *The Marrow of Human Experience: Essays on Folklore*, Utah State University Press,

PROVERBS AND PROVERBIAL PHRASES

Language is one of the most prominent methods of communication, and all its productions have the same function in some way, formally, informally, or artistically. It shows the worldview of the community and opens a door to the cultural world of the community. Each community's language is connected to their environment, religion, region, and tradition. For example, the proverbs of each region have their own contextual meaning, and the people of the proverb will understand what is really meant by that. For example, a proverb from Arabia can be translated as "*the leg of a date palm is in water and the head in fire.*" In this case, the 'date palm' and the 'hot climate in the dessert' are more related to the Arabian landscape. A person who doesn't know about these facts may not understand the real meaning. "A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation"⁸ Like this, every proverb, slang, proverbial phrase, and vernacular term is linked to the community and culture. Proverbs and proverbial phrases or sayings are not the

⁸ Wolfgang Mieder. (1993). *The wit of one and the wisdom of many: General thoughts on the nature of the proverb. Proverbs are never out of season: Popular wisdom in the modern ages.* Oxford University Press.

same. Proverbial phrases or sayings are phrases that are like proverbs but do not always keep the structure and style of proverbs. Even though there are opinions on the difference between this category, we are not classifying it into two but rather taking it together by focusing on the cultural peculiarities of both.

In Kerala, 'slang and region' have a vibrant point of discussion even among *Malayalees* (people who speak Malayalam or live in the Kerala region). The North, South, and Central Malabar areas of Kerala have differences in slang. The major difference is between the south on one side and the north and central Kerala on the other. The use of Arabic in rituals made the community more familiar with Arabic words. As a result, they use mixed Arabic and Malayalam sentences in their daily lives. The Malayalam in this region follows the Dravidian pattern. This mix of Dravidian patterns in south India and Arabic words creates a new style of words, sentences, or news styles in proverbs and proverbial phrases. There are several examples; some will make the point clearer.

"Nannaayaal Aboobacker, Vedakkayal Abu Jahal" (as Aboobacker when decent; as Abu Jahal when furious)

This proverb is directly connected to Islamic history. Abu Backer is a companion of Prophet Muhammad, and he was well known for his extraordinary character, while Abu Jahal, who lived in the same period, was renowned for his

furious character. From this, it is easy to understand that the proverb was used while some people behave very well at times, but sometimes the same people will exhibit the worst behavior.

“Ajlath Shaithan-Saboor Rahman” (Hurry, burry is from Satan; patience is from God)

Here, the whole four words are from the Arabic language: *ajlath*: hurry, burry; *shaithwan*: satan; *swabur*: patience; and *rahman*: most merciful, here meant as God Allah. Even though the words are in Arabic, the pronunciation will be in the local style. For example, in Arabic, the first letter for the word *swaboor* is 'SWA', but locally it is pronounced as 'SA' or 'saboor'. The same as in many Arabic words is pronounced in local style.

“Mu'minaaya mayyath poole” (like a faithful believer's dead body lying)

As per Islamic belief, after burying the body of a faithful man, it will remain for more days insoluble in earth compared to an unfaithful man. For example, if the fertilizer put around a tree or plant remains insoluble on earth for more days without any action, people comment like this.

“Aliyaar thangalde vaal poole” (like Ali's sword)

Ali is a prominent companion of Prophet Muhammad. The story of his double-edged, sharp sword is famous among the community. It is used in different contexts, both positively and negatively. This knife is as sharp as Ali's

sword. His tongue is like Ali's sword, which is used negatively because the community views sharp and talkative tongues as the behaviors of bad people.

“Athoru bahr aan” (it is like an ocean)

This is a general usage used to convey the vastness of something. That field of knowledge is like an ocean; his knowledge is vast as an ocean, and that land is like an ocean. Another usage is **“uhd mala poole”** (like *Uhud* mountain) or **“uhd malayoolam”** (as much as *Uhud* is). *Uhud* is a mountain in North Medina, Saudi Arabia. Which has a great role in the history of the community, so this specific mountain is familiar in Sayings. Mainly used to portray hugeness symbolically.

“Aali nadapurath pooya poole” (as Aali went to Nadapuram)

It is a regional saying used in *Vadakara, Nadapuram*, and around the *Kuttiady* area in Calicut district. There is a folk story behind that: once, the father of *Aali* said to him at night, 'You should go to *Nadapuram* tomorrow'. The next morning, his father was reminding him about the journey. Suddenly, he replied, 'I went already'. His father asked, for what purpose did you go? His reply was, 'You said to go, so I went and came back'. This story is narrated when some people say or do something, but they don't know what it is for. Another proverbial phrase commonly used to have the same meaning is **“aad Angadi pooya poole”** (as goat went

to market). The aimlessness of a person is criticized by this phrase.

“Mulappalil kittiyath, kabarile maaru” (The literal meaning of the proverb is ‘got from mother milk—only changes in the grave’ i.e., learned from childhood—only changes in the grave) It is a popular proverb similarly used among the community instead of ‘chottayile sheelam—chodale vare’ which has the same meaning.

Some other proverbial phrases are **“nalla insaan”** (he is a good man, an Arabic word meaning human) and **“alif baa ariyaathoon”** (one who doesn’t know *Alif* and *Ba*). ‘*Alif* and *Ba*’ are the first letters of the Arabic language. This is a similar proverb used to describe **‘harishree ariyathavan’**, he who doesn’t know *harishree*. *Harishree* is related to numerology. Both mean a person who doesn’t know the basics of reading and writing or is illiterate or ignorant. These are some mixed examples from the proverbial phrase tradition. From this, it is clear that the rich mix of Arabi and Malayalam is a unique feature of this tradition.

SLANG

‘Ni’-you are used as ‘*iy*’ and ‘*ij*’. The pronunciation of *ni* came to the removal of the *ni* sound and remains the last sound, ‘*yy*’, and is the same as the usage of ‘*jj*’ in many words, which is an iconic difference in the Malabar area. *Pashu:pajj* (cow), *Kuzhi: kujj* (dip), *Kai: kajj* (hand), *Mayyath: majjath* (dead body)

Another major change is the usage of the vowel ‘*ya*’ instead of ‘*zha*’ like in

Mazha: maya (rain), *puzha: poya* (river), *vaazha: baaya* (banana tree), *vazhi: vai* or *bai* (way), *muzha: moya* (lump), *uzhiyuka: uyyuka* (to rub on)

Change of vowel ‘*Va*’ instead of ‘*Zha*’, *Kazhukuka: kavvuka* (to wash); *mazhu: ma’u* (axe); *kazhutha: ka’utha* and *kaytha* (donkey); *kazhukan: kaukan* (vulture).

Usage of *Ba* instead of *Va*: *valli: balli* (corn), *velliyazhcha: belliyaicha* (friday), *valath: balath* (right side), *vesham: besham* (costume), *vishamam: beshamam* (hard times).

A popular usage used in line buses in the Malabar region is *beem beem, kee kee, and kiya kiya*. A person who reads this sentence may also feel like speaking some African language, but the expansion of this specific slang usage makes sense. ‘*Beem beem*’: *veegam veegam* (come fast), ‘*kee kee*’: *kiyuka* (verb *kiyuka* or commonly used by others as *iranguka* means, get down), ‘*kiya kiya*’: *kiyaam* (verb major usage as *irangaam*, that is, I am on the way down), *beu’ m beu’ m: veezhum* (will fall, so be careful). This is a short scene daily held in line buses like a story: the cleaner who works at the door shouts to travelers, *Beem beem ki ki*, which means to get down and hurry, while the traveler replies, *Kiya kiya*, I am on the way to get down, please wait. And other travelers near the step say, *Be’um be’um*, I will fall; be careful. And the bus moves to the next stop.

CONCLUSION

In summary, research on this distinct tradition of Mappila Muslims is ongoing, with a particular focus on a rigorous folkloric approach within Kerala folklore. The community maintains more indigenous slang and usages that have a distinct tradition behind them in contrast to mainstream culture. This analysis demonstrates the community's deep roots while providing insights into customs such as the influence of a rare Arab-regional mix and Dravidian language influences. Proverbs and phrases with a clever quality and a strong religious connotation—such as those that are directly related to the Hadith of the prophet, the Quran, etc.—are among the genres' distinctive characteristics. Proverbs and phrases exhibit internal positive criticism due to their sarcastic and critical nature. This critique or internal debate highlights the legacy of discursive. This critique or internal debate highlights the community's history of discourse. In this field, these analyses and examples are only a small portion of the story. Fieldwork provides a clear picture of how Kerala folkloric tradition and the understudied area will be valued cultural assets in the region.

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