

## Locating the Tradition of Mappila Ramayana in a Context of Cultural Grafting

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According to Albert B Lord, Professor of Harvard University, Text and Context are inseparable and without a sympathetic knowledge of context, the text may be misunderstood. He adds that, it is not sufficient to study performance and contextuality without an understanding of the tradition underlying them (Lord, 468).

This paper is an attempt to locate the performing tradition of Mappila Ramayana prevalent in the Mappila Community of Malabar region in Kerala, in a context of a cultural grafting<sup>1</sup>. Mappila Ramayana is a version of the Ramayana that narrates the story of Ramayana in the Mappila Malayalam language, a version of Malayalam widely used in the Malabar region of Kerala. It is an oral tradition of the region which is also called Muslim Ramayana or Islamic Ramayana and predominantly popularized in the Vada-kara region, now included in the Calicut district of Kerala.

I think, the text of Mappila Ramayana is most relevant in a context, where the Mappila Community and tradition are identified as evolved from the reception of two foreign cultures, the Arabic and Islamic (These two are different since Islamic Culture is purely based on the Holy Quran and Hadith, the preaching of Prophet Mohammed while Arabian culture is the culture of the Middle-east before the advent of Islam) by the people of South India, precisely Malabar region. The Mappila Ramayana is always considered as a means of entertainment than a literary piece that deserves serious attention. I think, it is because it was separated from the context. It definitely has an independent existence, but, locating it in the proper context and understanding the underlying tradition will enrich the existing work and thus, contribute to the better understanding of the same. This paper is also an attempt to trace

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<sup>1</sup> The idea that the encounter of two different cultures result in the birth of a new culture is called cultural grafting

the modes of that reception and the resultant effects on these communities to form a unique Mappila culture.

Mappila Malayalam which is also called Arabi-malayalam <sup>2</sup>is an innovative language which is a Malayalam with Arabic script. It dates back to those ages when Malayalam language lacked a proper script, and was depending on the primitive scripts like ‘vattezhuthu’ <sup>3</sup>and ‘kolezhuthu’<sup>4</sup>. It has extra letters in the Arabic alphabet to suit the Malayalam sounds.

Taking into account the two facts that, Kerala had a close relationship with Arabia even before the advent of Islam, and Arabic is the language of the Holy Quran, the possibilities of Muslims in Kerala, using Arabic language as a script is justifiable. Apart from the script, many words of Mappila Malayalam are adapted from the Arabic language and many are influenced by the Arabic language. Since it is a predominantly Muslim area, and the language has many Arabic influences, it is always misunderstood as an exclusively Muslim language. Though there is a strong influence of Islam and Arabic language in the Mappila Malayalam, it is used by the people of the region irrespective of their religion.

The word “Mappila” means son-in-law in Tamil and husband in Mappila Malayalam. “Puthu Mappila” is the bride groom in the latter. Also, the word is traced back to the south Kerala where, existed a group called” Pillai” <sup>5</sup>who were attributed greatness and called “Mahapillas”

(‘Maha’ means ‘great’ in Malayalam) which could have resulted in Mappila. Mappila sanskriti, a Mappila tradition and culture that is associated with the language. The Muslim community has a very rich oral tradition, with different variety of songs among which Mappilappattu and Malappattu are the remarkable ones.

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<sup>2</sup> See Fig.1.

<sup>3</sup> Vattezhuthu is an ancient South Indian script, used in Malayalam and Tamil. The literal meaning of the word is “round-writing”. The alphabets are round and thus, the name Vattezhuthu.

<sup>4</sup> Kolezhuthu is also an ancient South Indian script, especially used in Malayalam and Tamil. The literal meaning of the word is close to “line-writing”. The Alphabets are long and similar to lines which could be the reason for the origin of the word. Tamil script was influenced by Kolezhuthu. **Malayanma** is an ancient script used in Trivandrum and it belongs to the same family as Vattezhuthu and Kolezhuthu. See Fig.2.

<sup>5</sup> Pillai are Tamil and Malayalam speaking, dominant sub-group, of the elite caste of landlords called Vellalars.

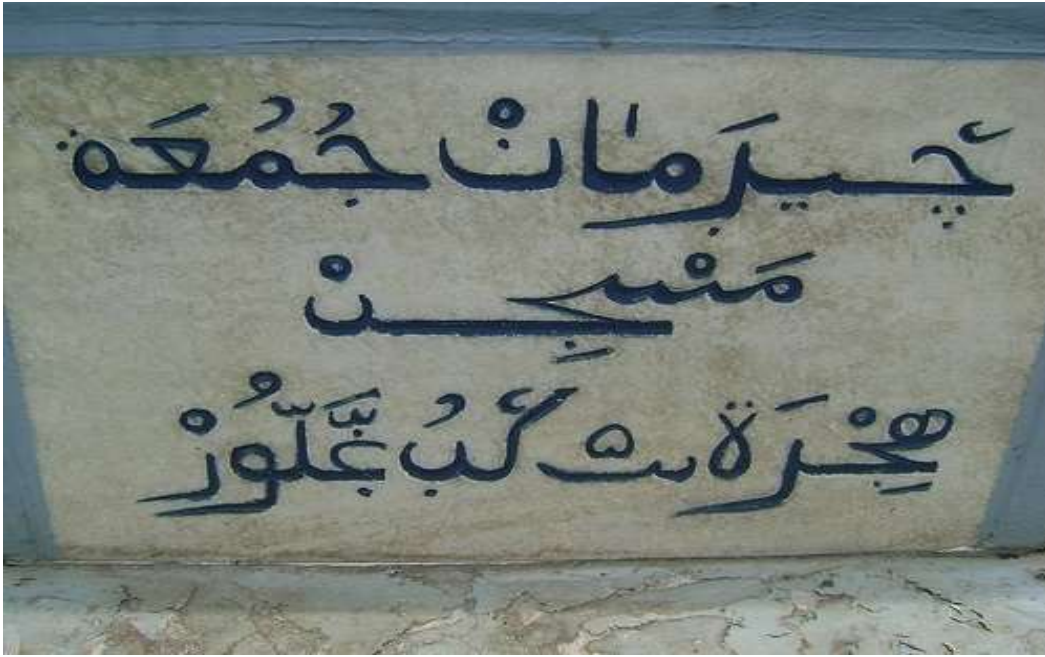


Fig.1. Arabic-Malayalam Inscriptions at Cheraman Juma masjid, Kodungalloor, Thrissur.

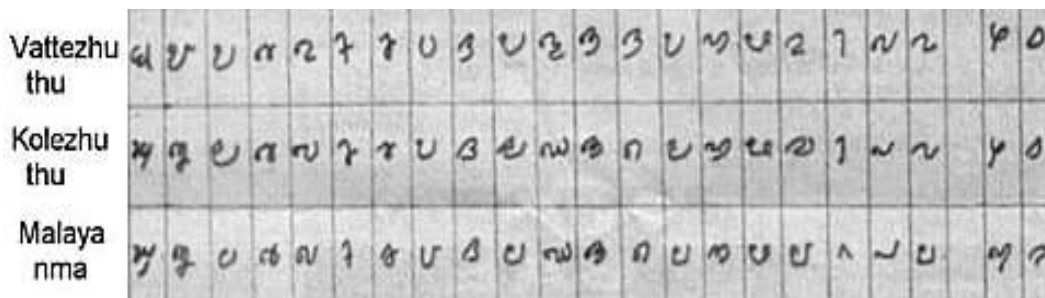


Fig.2. Alphabets of Vattezhuthu, Kolezhuthu and Malayanma Scripts.

**Rereading the Mappila Ramayana, as an Inherited Oral Tradition**

We can see that Mappila Ramayana is an oral tradition which is inherited through memory of generations and transmitted orally over long periods of time. This inherited memory is articulated by each generation with the considerable (since it is based on memory, it is obvious that there will be changes) differences from the previous generation.

T.H Kunji Raman Nambyar, popularized Mappila Ramayana in the Vadakara region and most of the enquiries about the text traces back to him. He was a magician, a Vadakkanpattu (ballads of medieval origins from north Malabar) exponent and an unorthodox person of a bohemian lifestyle. Nambyar sang Mappilappattu and Malappattu

along with Nadanpattu<sup>6</sup>. He was a great performer who used to sing Mappila Ramayana in academic sessions, discussions, friendly gatherings, on stages, and he even performed it on Eid as a part of celebrations.

It was when Dr. M.N. Karassery published the Mappila Ramayana in his book *Kurimanam*, the rich oral tradition got a written form. Later, a book namely “Mappila Ramayanavum Nadanpattukalum” was published using Nambyar’s name. It is said that Nambyar heard Mappila Ramayana from a Man called “Piranthan Hassankutty”. The word Piranthan which literally means “madman” could be a label towards his extraordinary thinking. Possibly, Mr. Nambyar identified Hassankutty, an exponent of an oral tradition, unlike others who failed to understand him. This alternative insight on Hassankutty is not to claim that he wrote or created this Mappila version of Ramayana, but to allow a different perspective on the journey of this work.

There are still claims in the academic world that there is a possibility that Nambyar produced the text himself and it is not an oral tradition. One of the examples drawn from the text to prove the claim is the phrase “nikkaram chayyinu” (performing the Namaz, the Muslim mandatory prayer that is repeated five times a day) in the later part of the text. The argument is that “Niskerikkunnu” is the usage in Mappila Malayalam and in the particular context, where Hanuman is bowing before Sita, “sujoodil aayi” (falling on one’s knees, a posture in the namaz) is the more apt usage. Even though it makes sense, it is not a proof of non-Muslim authorship, instead it strengthens the argument that it is an oral tradition, as it is evident that it has passed through different people, of different religions. There are still more instances in the text that prove that it has passed through different communities and people. And there are slight variations found in a few words used in the text recited by different people as a written form is absent.

Another reason, for Mappila Ramayana to be an oral, memory based tradition is that it was definitely memorized by people and reproduced till Dr. Karassery heard it from Nambyar and printed it for a wide reach. Thus, as a tradition that depends on memory and depends on the mind it is an inherited oral tradition of South India.

Also, in the text, there are instances where, different words are used for a single

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<sup>6</sup> a folk genre of primitive songs in Kerala

concept. Forexample, ‘Nikkah’ is the term widely used by Muslims for Marriage. On the other hand, Non-Muslims of different places use ‘Mangalam’ instead. ‘Nikkah’ is an Arabic word while ‘Mangalam’ is inflected from ‘Mangalyam’ a Malayalam word. Mappila Ramayanam uses both ‘Nikkah’ and ‘Mangalam’ in different contexts. Though mangalam is used when narrating the story of Ravana, and Nikkah when narrating the story of Rama, a more convincing explanation for this is that, as it was an inherited, oral tradition, and as it was based on memory, exact words must not be used. We can’t rely on its linguistic quality either.

Another feature of Mappila Ramayana which ensures its originality as an inherited oral tradition is the repetition of the word “Pattu” that means Song. Twenty two times, the song calls itself a song. It is said that Ramayana is an Oral tradition. Valmiki, the Maharshi who wrote Ramayana, composed it as a song. So, it again asserts the fact that it was from the beginning in the oral tradition.

Mappila Ramayana begins with these lines:

“Pandu Thadikkaranauli Paadi vanna Pattu

Kandathalle Njammalee Lamayanam katha pattu.”

This means,

The song that was sung by the bearded saint,

We have seen this lamayanam ballad (literally, story-song).

So, it asserts itself as a singing tradition, by opening with these lines and ending the next twenty lines with the word “pattu”.

In spite of variations in a few words used and missing lines, the existing lines are performed with consistency in the tune. These tunes, Ishals<sup>7</sup> are different for each part. This single Ishal is a proof that it is a mnemonic cultural tradition.

Each of the four different Ishals in Mappila Ramayana is meant for the context. For example, the final part of Mappila Ramayana, or last available portion of it, which narrates

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<sup>7</sup> Ishal is the melodic framework within which Mappila Songs are composed

Hanuman's Lanka Destruction, is composed in the Ishal of Padappattu. "Padappattu" means song of an army, where "pada" means an Army or group of people heading for a fight. This is a fast tune and is interesting to listen to as each word uttered is sharp, clear, and properly stressed providing the mood of a force preparing for war. Padappattu was a variety that was popularized during the Malabar Revolt of 1921. During the freedom struggles, these were written to inspire the fighters and their families. It was composed in such a captivating way that will inspire and take out the patriotic feeling in a person. It gives a festive mood to the whole scenario of war, suffering and miseries.

Only a few sections of the whole Ramayana story are available today as Mappila Ramayana. A general introduction of the story, Shoorpanaka's makeover before meeting Rama, Shoorpanaka's proposal to Rama, Ravana's proposal to Sita and his sorrow over rejection, Hanuman entering and destroying Lanka, are the available ones.

Though the text was in oral tradition, as a scriptural form came in July 1976 in *Kurimanam*, it became popular and got introduced to a wider audience unrestricted to the Vadakara region. Later, many critics wrote against a Mappila intervention in Ramayana as a calculated move to destroy a "holy" Ramayana tradition.

Newspaper reports, articles and studies were published on Mappila Ramayana which later led to academic discussions. Even though Nambyar was already singing during different occasions, it was after Karassey's publication that Mappila Ramayana got a serious academic interest. When the research scholars of different universities and writers and Ramayana experts like Paula Richman wrote about a wonderful creative version of Ramayana, some people fought over its authenticity and supposed wrong intentions. But there are sections of society who inherited not only the text, but the Ishal and spirit of the song. Different groups of folk singers (nattugayaka sankham) took birth and they performed it for different audience using wind instruments. "Thudi nattugayaka sankham" is one of such groups who still sing Mappila Ramayana.

### **Mappila Community as a Culturally Grafted Community**

"This fundamentalism denies the value and even the existence of civilizations that



preceded the revelations of the Koran. It was an article of 6th and 7th Century Arab faith that everything before it was wrong, heretical. There was no room for the pre-Islamic past.” (Naipaul 2001)

Here, V. S. Naipaul, the Nobel Prize winning writer vehemently criticizes the Islamic ideological insistence of erasing the past. He compared Islam with colonialism and resulted in serious controversy. He told that faith had a “calamitous effect” as converts must deny their heritage.

Islam does not acknowledge the term Pre-Islamic, since the religion declares that Islam is born along with the humans, and Adam is the first human and first Muslim on earth.

But Naipaul’s argument that Islam insists on an erasure of the past may be partly correct when it is applied to Muslim converts. For example, Islam strictly prohibits idol worship, which was a significant means through which Indians identified with their Gods. Indian tradition, through pictures, sculpture, and architecture, articulates their idea of God. On the other hand, Islam strictly prohibits anyway of articulation of the idea of God and asserts that God is free from material concepts of form and it is unreachable for human imagination.

These considerable difference in the ideologies and Islamic insistence on the erasure of past by the Muslim converts gave birth to an entirely new community, with a unique culture of their own. The tradition was unique in all sense; they had inherited from both cultures to form their unique culture marking a difference in the food, clothing, learning traditions, etc.

By embracing Islam, a person or a community had to erase their past, their culture and tradition to move on to a completely different one. Deleting the memory they inherited long ago will be difficult process. The result will be a new society with a new tradition. This phenomenon of formation of a new culture deriving influences from the assimilation of two contributing cultures is called cultural grafting.

Mappila Community, the Muslim community of Malabar region of Kerala, is a community which was culturally grafted. A new Mappila Sanskriti or Mappila tradition

was the result of advent of Islam to the independent culture of South India, to be precise, Kerala. The tradition is born out of an encounter of two entirely different cultures. It was not assimilation, nor a conflict or incongruity. It was a cultural grafting, an adaptation. It could be termed as a reception, a cultural reception, more precisely an unconscious reception.

Though the religion strictly prohibits idol worship and insists on God as the single superpower, to whom one should pray directly, Mappila Muslims retained most of their customs including the idol worship and they, unlike Islamic doctrines, attributed more importance to human beings, the dead and the saints.

Also, they perceived most of the religion in a ritualistic form. For example, they started doing the Friday sermons in Arabic, instead of regional languages, (Friday sermons are introduced to educate the masses and doing it in a Foreign language, will not satisfy its purpose) and gave a complete ritualistic nature to a religion which was more of a way of life.

As an example of cultural grafting, an analysis of the cuisine of these cultures will be appropriate. Rice is a staple food of Kerala while Arabs used different kinds of bread. The Mappila cuisine, which is a result of grafting of these two, uses Pathiri, as their major food which is a form of bread made of rice.

The Mappila community always lived very close to people of other religion. Malabar area is famous for its communal harmony. Mappila Ramayana takes birth in such a place, Vadakara. There people got involved in the performances as participants and audience and proved as really open minded so as to see literature in its true light. It was the “educated” society, and mostly people outside the Mappila tradition were disturbed about Mapilas getting involved in Ramayana and Ramayana being propagated by the Mappilas<sup>8</sup>.

### **Mappila Ramayana as a Tradition from a Culturally Grafted Community**

Mappila Ramayana could be told as a Mappila response or a Malabari (of Malabar) response to one of the most ancient epics of India which has over three hundred or more versions according to the famous scholar and poet, A.K. Ramanujan (Ramanujan, 22). When a group of the Keralites embraced Islam, their culture, and tradition got changed in exponential rates. A new variety of language came as the Arabic Malayalam language, along

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<sup>8</sup> This is why there were uprisings when Mappila Ramayana was popularised by its publication by Karassery



with new rituals, dressing styles (which indeed is mandatory in Islam), food, customs, and a new way of living (as Islam defines itself as a way of living and influences it more than any other religion will do). This would have distanced them from the tradition they inherited and Mappila Ramayana could be a Relocation of them in that tradition they inherited. And to use Derrida's words, it was their way of "relaunching and keeping the tradition alive."

Mappila Ramayana describes itself as, "kaathu randilum kaiviralittorikoottum pattu" which means, A song sung loudly by placing fingers in each ear. This, resonates the way Adhan, the Muslim call for prayer, is performed. Before the advent of microphones, the Mulla will keep both his thumbs in respective ears and take his maximum voice to do the rhythmic call that is supposed to be heard in the whole locality. It is an instance of cultural grafting because Adhan is an Islamic concept and Ramayana, an Indian tradition.

In the Indian tradition, Rama Namam (name of Rama) considered more powerful than Ramayana itself and is recited continuously as a ritual. The same way, Islam introduces a concept called Asmahul husna, or good names, which are hundred different names of the God, Allah that could be used while praying for extra benefits. But Mappila Ramayana uses the refrain "Rama rama rama rama", the Rama namam, as an introduction to a particular Ishal, or tune, similar to the "sa-ri-ga ma" notes in the musical tradition. Though the refrain "lama lama" is a very crucial part of Mappila Ramayana, defining its nature, using different Ishals or tunes for each situation, the words have got no religious connotation and no particular benefit is associated with it. Here, the inherited oral tradition, differentiates itself from the two parental traditions to form an entirely new one. But the text claims that it is an oral tradition, which praises Rama.

"Ramante elu koottum pattu", is the phrase used which literally means "The song which adds to the greatness of Rama."

Here, it could be retaining the quality of Ramayana, the original or mere praise of the King, Rama.

Mappila Ramayana calls Rama as "Sultan" or king. We can assume that the usage "Sultan" was added to Mappila Ramayana in the course of its evolution. It could be after the invasion of Kerala by Tippu Sultan (1766 to 1792).

“Kalakkedinu Halakkile Sultan Mayyithayi  
Sheelam-Kettolkkinnumvenam  
Mappilayonnu”

This is a line from Mappila Ramayana which means,  
‘At an unfortunate time, the terrible Sultan died,  
And the lady of bad habits needs a husband again.’

This is the instance when Shoorpanakha is introduced. She is called “Sheelam kettol” in the text. It means a lady of bad habits. Here, the attitude of the society, towards the women, who remarry is obvious. She was called “Sheelam kettol”, only because she wanted to remarry. It was not acceptable for the Mappila community even though Islam encourages widow marriages. Here, they relaunch their tradition, where one man for a woman and one woman for a man is considered ideal. Considering that it was a tradition, where practices like Sati existed, it was unacceptable for the society to encourage a widow marriage.

Another instance of evidence for cultural grafting in the text is the reference to the Law of Shariah<sup>9</sup>. Here, Rama, the protagonist of the story misinterprets the law of Shariah, which is corrected by Shoorpanakha, a negative character. Rama says that, according to the Law of Shariah, a man can marry only one woman and vice versa. But Shoorpanakha corrects him saying that, a Man can marry four or five (in actual Law of Shariah, only four is allowed) but a woman cannot is what Shariah says. Here, misinterpreting the law, Mappila Ramayana rebelliously negates the Islamic law and retains the Indian tradition. It uses the Islamic term Shariah and the Indian traditional element together.

In short, this paper was an attempt to prove Mappila Ramayana as an inherited, memory based oral tradition, developed from a culturally grafted Community, the Mappila community. There was an insistence of erasure of past associated with the Islamic culture and thus Mappila Ramayana could be identified as an attempt to re-launch the tradition (Derrida), which they were forced to leave behind using the culture they received. It was widely noted due to the effectiveness in combining and assimilating the two entirely different cultures, adopting the desirable from both. The title itself is one that will kindle the interest since it has

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<sup>9</sup> Law of Shariah is a system of law and order advised in Islam.

the two contradicting cultures present in it, Mappila and Ramayana, representing the Muslim and non-Muslim respectively.

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