

The Origin and Evolution of Mappilapattu

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Introduction

Many Muslims in Malabar represent a fusion of Arabian and Kerala cultures. While their names and rhythms reflect Islamic influence, their expressive style is distinctly Kerala in character. "Mappilapattu" stands as a cultural symbol, deeply resonating with the community's identity and tightly woven into the traditions of Kerala. Mappila folk songs, performed in a melodic form called "*Ishal*" in Arabi Malayalam, originate from the Mappilas of Malabar in India. This musical tradition has been developing for over seven centuries, emerging from the Arabi Malayalam language and literature, commonly known as Mappila literature. The earliest known work in this genre is *Muhyidheen Mala*, written by *Qazi Muhammad* in 1607 AD.

Over time, various forms of "Mappilapattu" have evolved in response to the changing religious and political contexts of the Mappila community. Initially, many compositions were devotional, but during the colonial period, battle songs called "*Padappattu*" emerged. Other themes soon followed, including romance, marriage, philosophy, sea voyages, and even accounts of floods. "Mappilapattu" holds a distinct cultural identity that has had a profound impact on Malayalam poetry and media, including cinema and television, while remaining closely tied to the cultural traditions of Kerala. These songs blend Arabic and Malayalam vocabulary, but their grammatical structure is rooted firmly in Malayalam.

Moyinkutty Vaidyar

The renowned poet Moyinkutty Vaidyar played a crucial role in shaping Mappila culture in Malayalam. His works explore the emotional and theoretical dimensions of this cultural identity, influencing the imagination of the Malayali people and bringing to light the feelings embedded in the land's cultural fabric. Moyinkutty Vaidyar (1852–1892), often honored with the title *Mahakavi* (great poet), is regarded as one of the central figures in the Mappila pattu tradition of Malayalam literature. His life and the social norms of his time deeply influenced his poetic voice. The Mappila community's customs during this era helped nurture Mappila arts, elevating the status of its artists. The songs, games, and folk arts that are central to Mappila culture thrived through various festive rituals.

Moyinkutty Vaidyar's life, environment, and creative imagination had a profound impact on his writing. His works reflect a rich blend of romanticism, sentiment, and philosophy, which contributed to their broad appeal and enduring relevance. To fully appreciate the depth and significance of his poetry, one must explore the diverse conceptual and imaginative contexts that shaped his work. By examining key literary contributions such as Padapatt, Kissapatt, Kathu patt, and Nimisha Kavitas, we can better understand the emotional resonance and scope of Vaidyar's poetry, revealing the popular foundations that gave rise to his creative legacy.

Early years

Moyinkutty Vaidyar, the renowned Mappila poet, was born into the prestigious Alungalkandi family at Ootuparakkuzhiyil. His father, Unni Mammad Vaidyar, was a respected Arya Vaidyar, poet, and scholar, while his mother, Kunjamina, was a celebrated music performer and singer. In Malabar, it was a common practice among higher-status Muslim families to present signatures to the bride and groom during weddings, a gesture that not only signified social status but also highlighted the prestige of the families involved. This practice led to a kind of competition among families to secure well-known singing groups for their celebrations, with some even arranging marriages to coincide with the availability of these esteemed performers.

Kunjamina was particularly renowned for her Oppana performances in Kondotty, leading a talented group of singers. At the time, opportunities for women—especially Muslim women—to receive secular education and become accomplished singers were scarce. The Alungalkandi family had a longstanding tradition of serving as medical practitioners and respected religious figures. Education was highly valued, especially since the skilled practice of medicine was considered a family occupation. This strong family heritage, characterized by social standing, financial stability, and a deep commitment to education and culture, profoundly influenced Vaidyar's worldview from a young age. These formative experiences likely played a significant role in shaping Moyinkutty Vaidyar's distinctive approach to poetry, allowing him to emerge as a visionary and innovator within the literary tradition, transcending societal conventions. The influence of his parents on literature and their intellectual environment was also crucial in shaping his perspective on life and his poetic expression.

Education

Moyinkutty Vaidyar pursued his studies in theology and related subjects at local institutions such as Othupalli and Dars, completing his religious education at the Wandoor Jamaat Mosque. Coming from a family of physicians, he learned Sanskrit from his father and local scholars, and studied Tamil language and literature under the guidance of the poet Chulliyar Beerankutty. He was also taught Persian by Nizamuddin Miya, a renowned scholar of Persian and Hindustani. In addition, Vaidyar received Malayalam instruction from the traditional Malayalam Pandit Velu Ezhuthachan, and had a working knowledge of Kannada and Telugu.

Vaidyar's broad academic interests included classical literature and medical texts in Sanskrit, such as Ashtanga Hridaya, Charaka, and Sushruta, as well as the great epics Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the tales of Krishna's Leela. His interactions with scholars like Nizamuddin Miya, as well as Tamil poets such as Abubakar Pulavar and Abdul Kader Mastan, played a significant role in shaping his poetic development. His works reflect a blending of Indo-Persian traditions, mythology, and storytelling, showcasing his familiarity with Hindustani ragas and the rich Tamil musical heritage.

One key feature of Mappilappattu is that the act of singing holds more importance than the composition itself. While expressive singing is crucial for any poem's vitality, Mappila songs have preserved their emotional depth through the lyrical traditions of Arabic poetry. This tradition of singing is closely linked to the social contexts of the community, fostering religious and philosophical understanding. From a young age, Vaidyar was actively involved in singing groups, eager to carry forward the legacy of his predecessors. He seamlessly incorporated their styles and idioms into his own poetry, enriching his creative journey. These influences, along with his broad educational foundation, helped establish him as a key figure in the Mappilappattu tradition, setting him apart from other practitioners. As such, studying Vaidyar's poetry offers valuable insight into a culturally significant period in the history of the Kerala Muslim community.

Classical Works of Moyinkutty Vaidyar: Badarul Muneer and Husnul Jamal

Moyinkutty Vaidyar wrote *Badarul Muneer and Husnul Jamal* (1872), one of his most celebrated works in Arabi-Malayalam. This poem draws inspiration from a Persian novel by Khwaja Moinuddin Sha Shirazi and boldly challenges the patriarchal norms of society. *Badarul Muneer Husnul Jamal* captures the essence of love in the hearts of the Mappilas. The Persian novel was translated for Vaidyar by Kondotty Thangal Nilamuddin, a Persian scholar and his relative. Completed in 1289 AH (1872 AD), the first edition was printed two years later in 1291 AH by Kunjaha Mammad at Arayalipuram in Thalassery. It is considered the first love poem in Arabic Malayalam literature, blending factual and romantic elements. No other Mappila poet has adopted this style in the same way. The poem stands out not only for its depiction of love's sweetness but also for its adventurous spirit, making it a groundbreaking piece in Malayalam poetry.

The story centers on two childhood friends, *Badarul Muneer* and *Husnul Jamal*, whose bond grows deeper despite the societal customs trying to keep them apart. When the king learns of their relationship, he forbids *Badarul Muneer* from entering the palace. As the lovers plan to elope, a fisherman named *Abuzayyad* overhears them and informs the

king's minister, who then places Badarul Muneer under house arrest. Disguised as Badarul Muneer, Abuzayyad escapes with the princess, but she discovers the betrayal the next morning. Husnul Jamal embarks on a journey filled with supernatural challenges and trials to reunite with Badarul Muneer. The poem concludes with their reunion and King Mahazin relinquishing his throne in favor of Badarul Muneer.

Death of Vaidyar

In the later years of his life, Moyinkutty Vaidyar adopted a new writing style, though it was his Mappilapattu that truly cemented his legacy as a beloved poet. He often worked on his compositions at Muchundi Mosque in Kuttichira. Even as he neared the end of his life, his creative spirit remained strong. Just days before his death, his disciples transcribed verses he recited from his deathbed, reflecting his undying passion for poetry. At the young age of 40, Vaidyar passed away, leaving behind his wife and three children. Sadly, no photographs or paintings of the poet have survived, and none of his descendants are known to have lived beyond his children. His father outlived him and completed the work Hijra on his behalf. The Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar Smarakam, a memorial at his birthplace in Kondotty, preserves many of his handwritten works.

Prominent Kerala writer M.T. Vasudevan Nair has stressed that Moyinkutty Vaidyar should not be viewed simply as a poet of a minority community, drawing a comparison to Nobel laureate Ishak Bal Shevik, a Hebrew poet from Iceland. He argued that poets transcend such labels. C.P. Sreedharan, another respected writer, credits Vaidyar with introducing romanticism into Malayalam literature. His poetry also gave voice to the working class, critiquing landlordism and imperialism.

Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar Smarakam

The Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar Smarakam is a memorial dedicated to the renowned poet, Moyinkutty Vaidyar (1852–1892), who is celebrated as one of the foremost figures in the Mappila pattu tradition of Malayalam literature. The memorial serves to honor his legacy and contributions to Malayalam poetry. The Mappila Art Study Center, located at the Vaidyar Memorial, was officially opened by the Minister

for Culture, M.A. Baby, in June. The Vaidyar Memorial Committee was reformed by the Kerala Department of Culture in 1991. On December 22, 1992, the committee was established in Korampa, with Ahmed Kuttihaji serving as its chairman. On July 11, 1994, the Public Works Department allocated 87 acres of land in Kondotty for the construction of the memorial. Chief Minister K. Karunakaran laid the foundation stone on December 24, 1994, and the memorial was officially inaugurated by Chief Minister E.K. Nayanar on June 13, 1999.

To mark the memorial's opening, a welcoming committee met on April 5, 1999, at Seethi Haji Auditorium in Kondotty to plan cultural events for the inauguration, which took place on May 6, 7, and 8. In May, 84 participants from the Mappila Art Study Centre underwent 20 days of training in various traditional art forms such as Mappilapattu, Oppana, Arabana, Kolkali, and Vattapattu, under the guidance of the memorial.

Important Poets and Literature in Mappilapattu

This section highlights key figures and their contributions to Mappilapattu, a prominent literary and musical tradition in Kerala, particularly within the Muslim community.

Kunjayin Musliyar

Kunjayin Musliyar, a multifaceted figure, is celebrated not only for his comedic works and Mangattachan jokes but also for his profound contributions as a religious scholar, philosopher, social reformer, and Mappila poet. He is often compared to Nasruddin Hoja, the humorous character associated with Mangattachan, the court jester of the Zamorin king. Born around 1700 AD, Kunjayin Musliyar received his early education at Thalassery Waliya Jumu'at Palli before studying in Ponnani, a well-known center for Islamic learning. He studied Karma Shastra under prominent scholars like Nooruddin Makhdoom and Abdslam Makhdoom, which influenced his distinctive style of humor.

Padappattu

In his later years, Kunjayin Musliyar shifted to composing Padappattu, war songs that narrate historical events and struggles. Two of his most notable works include:

- Badar Padappattu: Also known as Shabvathul Badarul Kubra, this song recounts the historic Battle of Badr, where Prophet Muhammad and his companions fought against the Meccan army.
- Malappuram Padappattu: Written in 1883, this poem explores the struggles of peasants in Malappuram during the 18th and 19th centuries. It focuses on a conflict between the Mappilas and a local landlord, Para Nambi, culminating in a battle with tragic consequences and a theme of remorse and reconciliation.

Pulikottil Hyder

Pulikottil Hyder, born in 1879, was a significant figure in Mappila literature, known for his accessible Mappilapattu and Kathupattu. His writing, often compared to Kunchan Nambiar's, reflected contemporary social issues while incorporating Islamic history and Persian tales. One of his most notable works, Flood Chain, addresses the devastating floods that struck Malabar, Mysore, and Travancore, poignantly depicting the hardships of flood victims in a language that resonated with the common people.

Chakiri Moydeen Kutty

Chakiri Moydeen Kutty was an influential scholar, poet, and historian who wrote the epic Gatu Badrul Kub in Arabic Malayalam. His work on the Battle of Badr preceded other significant compositions, including Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar's Badar Padappattu. His contributions to Mappila literature were so profound that an award was established in his honor to recognize individuals who have advanced the tradition of Mappilapattu.

T. Ubaid

T. Ubaid, born on October 7, 1908, in Kasaragod, was a poet, scholar, and cultural figure whose works often focused on themes of Islam and patriotism. Despite dropping out of formal schooling, Ubaid became a prolific writer and teacher. His deep connection to Mappila culture shaped his poetry, which he composed in various styles, including Arabic and Baitu, further enriching the tradition of Mappilapattu.

V.M. Kutty

Vadakkumkara Mohammed Kutty (V.M. Kutty), born on April 16, 1935, played a key role in popularizing the literary and musical heritage of Mappilapattu. Initially a teacher, he later pursued a career in singing and became known for introducing female singers into the genre. V.M. Kutty also authored numerous books exploring the history and cultural significance of Mappilapattu, making valuable contributions to preserving and promoting the tradition.

OM Karuvarakundu

Ottamaliakal Muthukoya Thangal, widely known as OM Karuvarakundu, is a contemporary Mappilapattu poet and Oppanapattu composer. With a career spanning over thirty years, Karuvarakundu has made significant contributions to the genre with his distinctive style. After retiring as an Arabic teacher, he published a wide range of works, including poems and short stories, further enriching the cultural landscape of Mappilapattu.

Conclusion

Mappilapattu is a distinctive form of folk music that emerged in the coastal regions of Kerala, predominantly within the Muslim communities of the state. Its origins can be traced back to the early interactions between the local Malayalam-speaking populations and Arabic-speaking traders, travelers, and missionaries, particularly during the medieval period. The genre blends elements of traditional Malayalam folk music with influences from Arab, Persian, and African musical traditions, forming a unique cultural fusion that has evolved over centuries. Historically, Mappilapattu developed as a means of expressing religious devotion, social commentary, and community identity. Its roots lie in the early Islamic presence in Kerala, with many of the songs focusing on themes of Sufism, Islamic teachings, and the experiences of the Muslim community. Over time, Mappilapattu also embraced broader themes such as social justice, the struggles of the oppressed, and the celebration of local culture and heritage. The evolution of Mappilapattu has been shaped by various socio-political and cultural forces. From its early connection to Islamic rituals and community gatherings, the genre

expanded in scope, incorporating elements of modernity while retaining its traditional core. This adaptability allowed Mappilapattu to remain relevant through changing historical and cultural contexts, from colonial periods to contemporary times. In conclusion, Mappilapattu is not only a musical form but also an essential aspect of Kerala's cultural landscape. Its continued relevance lies in its ability to bridge the past and present, preserving the traditions of the Mappila community while adapting to contemporary artistic expressions. The genre's evolution reflects the dynamic nature of Kerala's cultural and religious history, making it a living testament to the region's rich multicultural heritage.

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