

War Songs as a Source of Kerala History- An Analysis of Malappuram war song by Moyin Kutty Vaidyar

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The folk literature can in one sense claim to be the oldest surviving genre of literature in the 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 and literature of Kerala, thereby providing an unbroken tradition of different communities. It has the broadest basis of contact with the social realities of the life of the people of all castes and ranks. Every group of people that inhabited in the land of Kerala has left its indelible stamp on Malayalam folk literature¹. 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 Perso Arab traditions. It is why the Mappila literature and folk culture takes a diversion of the local culture prevailing in Kerala.

The Mappila folk culture² includes tales, ballads, songs and local life style evolved through the native and immigrant culture. Like all the folk cultures, the folk traditions of Mappilas also had a free and loyal culture which fostered unity and oneness among themselves and particularly in the peasant societies and the culture was moulded on a continuous and concrete set of beliefs and ideals. It arose as a Islamized form of local traditions of peasants and acquired a vigorous and vibrant mood among the converted people. As in Yellow Turban revolution in China and Zanj revolution in East Africa and the likewise risings in Europe and Africa the peasant rising s in Malabar had also synonymous set of informal rules.

The Mappilas who hitherto followed a peaceful and adaptive culture wore a militaristic robe when the Colonial powers began to interfere in their freedom and life culture.³ At the same time other peasant communities in the region followed a submissive attitude towards the colonial invaders. The Mappila peasants headed by their spiritual leaders, who were mostly from the South Arabian sayyids and thulama took arms against their oppressors. The zeal to join the struggles prompted the non Mappila peasants to convert *enmasse* to 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 development of the Mappila peasant society into a distinct community by synthesizing the local traditions with that of the Islamic variants . The rural tales and Islamic stories are beautifully amalgamated in the Mappila songs so as to present the Islamic culture to suit the peasant life of the area. The Islamic preaching among the peasant communities was mainly provided by the migrants from Tamil Nadu like Makhdums and Marakkayars ,⁴ there was ample opportunity to import Tamil Muslim styles to Malabar. Tamil styles had a great impact upon the Mappila literature particularly the Mappila songs. Many poets and scholars had gone to Tamil Nadu region to study Tamil Muslim songs of the poets called pulavars. Even the great Mappila poet Mahakavi Moyin Kutty had his studies at the Muslim centres of Tamil Nadu like Kayal Pattanam and Tenga Pattanam.⁵ The Mappila Battle songs are also modeled after the 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 1836.⁶ However the war songs became popular with the commencement of anti colonial struggles against the British and Moyin Kutty Viaydar who lived in this period was responsible for this. He composed songs on Islamic as well as local battles and it was followed by others. Composing of war songs in local dialect was considered as sacred since it gives inspiration for jihad against the colonialists. In the preface of his work, *'Uddat al Umara....* Sayyid Fazl makes it a duty of the rulers and leaders, to compose songs on the virtues of *jihad* for the fighters in their own language, for such songs are like the file or rasp which sharpens the sword.⁷ The war song on the Islamic battle of Badr which took place in 634 AD was the first of its kind composed by Moyin Kutty Vaidyar in 1876. Later he composed war song on the war on Uhd, the second battle of Prophet Muhammad. The style was followed by other Mappila poets and war songs on almost all the Islamic battles were composed in Mappila language. The Malappuram pade,⁸ composed by Vaidyar is on a local battle at Malappuram between a native ruler and Muslims of the area that took place in 1729. The song became very famous that its narration was a common practice in the Mappila centres during the period of outbreaks.⁹

As source of Kerala history Malappuram war song of Moyin Kutty Vaidyar deals with two important aspects; the conversion of on Kerala king to Islam, the widely prevalent tradition of the Mappilas and the other on a rarely known battle by the Mappilas against Para Nambi,¹⁰ the local chieftain of the area for protecting the great mosque. The song reveals the conversion of Cheraman Perumal a Hindu King to the fold of Islam as maintained by the Mappila Muslims.¹¹

According to the war song the King Cheraman Perumal had lived during the life time of Prophet Muhammad and the king had witnessed the splitting of the moon, a miracle by the prophet, from Malabar and this prompted him to convert to Islam. He also mentions a story of the queen, Cheraman's consort who fell in love with Padamala Nair,¹² the minister who when refused for a sexual relation with her, she herself fabricated a story that the minister was molesting her. The furious king gave his verdict to hang the minister. The minister, however escaped the execution miraculously with a warning to the king unless he embraced Islam at the feet of Prophet Muhammad, his sins for punishing an innocent man will not be washed away. Later when the king realized his mistakes he decided to go to Makkah and embrace Islam.¹³ The king converted to Islam at the feet of the prophet and he was given the name Tajuddin (the crown of the faith)¹⁴ After living with prophet for five years and he left for Malabar in the ninth year of year of Hijrah (641 AD). The king and his party reached at Muqallah in South Arabia where he fell ill and died. He was buried at Salalah (now in Oman). Before his death he had given letters to various princes of Malabar and with letter a party comprising of Malik bin Dinar and his relatives set out for Malabar.¹⁵

The Malappuram war song contains 71 songs in different styles (ishal) and from twelfth song onwards the poet starts the narration of the Malappuram battle.¹⁶ Zamorin, the king of Calicut was the strongest of all the Malabar kings and he ruled over the major parts of Malabar. He was assisted by Samanthas (deputies).¹⁷ The tradition says that the Muslims of Malappuram had assisted the Nambi to defeat his enemy, the Vellattiri Raja at Kottakkal near Malappuram and as a reward to Muslims the Nambi constructed a Muslim Village and a beautiful mosque on the banks of Malappuram River. People from Ponnani, Tirurangadi and

other places settled at Malappuram and a scholar from Ponnani (Hassan Kutty) was invited to lead the prayers.¹⁸ The immediate reason for the Malappuram outbreak of 1729 was the decision of Pāranambi, the chieftain of the Zamorin, to destroy the mosque which was renovated by Pocker Hasan Qazi¹⁹ with the financial assistance of Mappila traders.. Following a dispute between Pāranambi and his revenue collector Ali Marakkar, the infuriated Nambi gave order to evict all the Mappila tenants from their land and to put the Malappuram mosque, which had been constructed at his predecessor , to flames. The reason for the attitude of the Nambi was the ill advice of some of his relatives who were punished by his tax collector , Ali Marakkar²⁰ for not paying taxes regularly. When Ali Marakkar exacted taxes vigorously the infuriated lords complained Nambi regarding the attitude of Ali Marakkar and the Nambi, in order to appease his relatives, put the blame up on Marakkar himself. Thereupon lords hatched a conspiracy to kill Ali Marakkar and Nambi had no other way except to support his lords. Ali was summoned to the court, but he smelled the conspiracy. He retaliated with all his strength and wounded and killed many of the lords and even the Nambi was deeply by a single stroke of Ali. However some one shot Ali but he continued his fight until he fell on the ground and died.²¹

The Nambi as advised his people decided to burn the mosque which was built by his own predecessor, and invited armies from the neighbouring territories. The news reached the ears of Muslims who appealed Nambi to leave them free and to allow them to leave the place. Nambi was adamant in his decision and his army marched towards the mosque. Muslims decided to defend the mosque at the cost of their life and they assembled inside the mosque. Vaidyar gives a pitiful description on how the warriors were leaving their wives, parents and children in

order to participate in the battle.²² The war song put the date of the Malappuram battle as 9th March 1729(9th Sha'ban 1141)²³

A major part of the song is devoted for the fighting scenes of the battle and their consequences. The water to the mosque was collected from a stream on the hill laying nearby through a channel. The enemy prevented the water on the hill whereby the Muslim fighters inside the mosque suffered hardships. Muslims, at last rushed out of the mosque at night and fought against the enemies in the darkness. The enemies fell in dilemma and many of them were cut to pieces at the hands of Muslims. The remaining soldiers of the Nambi ran away and reached at the palace. Nambi was furious to see the defeated soldiers and he forced them to return to the place and burn the mosque to save himself from the disgrace. He reinforced the army and marched again towards the mosque. The Muslims retaliated vigorously. The scene of the war is well illustrated by the poet with all its vigor.²⁴ The Muslims however couldn't withstand the combined attack of the enemy who threw fire at the mosque. The roof of the mosque was of the palm leaves that caught fire easily. The whole mosque including those inside were put to flames. Traditions say that soon after the destruction of the mosque diseases spread in the palace of the Nambi and his people began to die every day. The divine man (komaram) of the temple made a statement that the wrath of god had descended on Nambi because of the destruction of the mosque and it can be washed away only by reconstructing the mosque by Nambi himself. Nambi, thereupon called the Muslim leaders and regretted for his mistakes and renovated the mosque at his own expenses²⁵. About fifty Muslims and 975 of the Nambi's men were killed in the battle.²⁶

At the end of the song the author eulogize the martyrs and says that they are immortal and calling their names in the hour and despair will be a source of solace and relief.²⁷ During the Mappila out breaks this war song was the source of inspiration for the intending *shahids* (martyrs). The authorities forfeited the copies of these songs and banned their recitation.²⁸ For the local Muslims, the Malappuram war was a jihad against the oppression of the local ruler and those Muslims who killed in the battle were enshrined as *shahids*. They began to celebrate a local festival (Malappuram *Nercha*) to commemorate the martyrs and it is continued even today. To SF.Dale the festival is significant as one known element of continuity in the disturbed and hostile relations between Mappilas and the Hindu landed class from the pre Mysorean period to the time of the Mappila out breaks in the nineteenth century²⁹ But it is only a rare incident in the history of Mappila –Zamorin relations that throughout the history Muslims were at peace with the zamorins. However Mr.Dale rightly records that the war song and the *nercha* ceremonies held in connection with the Malappuram martyrs “have by themselves helped to preserve and revivify the ideal of the *shahids* in the community, but it was especially the literature which this festival generated in the past which had a visible influence on some of the nineteenth century Mappila out breaks. War songs about the attractions of martyrdom were widely circulated in the nineteenth century and the narration of the poem and its commentary became a fine art during this period.³⁰ The Mappila rebels used to recite the war songs not only on Malappuram battle but also on Islamic battles like battle of Badar and Uhd. It is interesting that printed copies of war songs were found in the bodies of two Mappilas who died as *shahids* in the 1896 out breaks. After the revolt of Kulathur in 1873, a number of Mappilas were captured and sent to Rajamundri in

AndhraPradesh where they were imprisoned. The prisoners used to send money and letters to their relatives at Kulathur. The authorities found that one of the persons had attached a war song with his letter and it was composed by the prisoners themselves.³¹ "On the bodies of the two killed at Manjeri (the rebels of 1896 outbreak) were found two Mappila song books. One of them under the title, *History of the Martyrs of Malappuram* composed in a very poetical language by Ottupurakkal Alingalkandi Mayankuty Vaidyar."³²

The Malappuram war was purely political and economical, and it cannot be regarded as a part of Hindu Muslim rivalry as put by British authorities. Muslims of Malappuram lived quite peacefully under the Zamorins and his chieftains and the construction of the mosque itself was a gift of earlier Paranambi. Basically the cause lay in the land lord- tenant conflicts since the immediate reason for the war was the decision of Nambi to exact the tax arrears from the lords. What happened was that when Ali Marakkar asked the lords to pay the arrears they lodged complaints to Nambi against Ali Marakkar for which he was not basically responsible. The lords, being the relatives of Nambi he put the blame up on Marakkar and was forced to support the lords in their cause.³³ It is also to be noted that the Muslims, in their battle were helped by the local Hindu tenants that a gold smith called Kunhelu was one of those who killed in the battle on Muslim side.³⁴ The chieftains were not in the habit of recording all the events occurred in their times and the story of the Malappuram war, was orally transmitted by the local people and during the colonial period it became a source of inspiration to the Mappila fighters. Moyin Kutty vaidyar, started composing of his war songs with story of the Battle of Badr which happened in Madina in 624, The Malappuram war song was his first attempt on a regional incident and this enhanced his position

as a poet in the religious circle when he presented the song for the first time before the sayyids, elders and the populace of Malappuram on Friday 13th January 1883.³⁵

¹ Amaresh Datta, *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* (Vol.II), Sahitya Akademi, 2006,p. 1299

² For a close study of Folk Culture and songs see Alan Lomax, *Folk song style and culture*, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Transaction Publishers, 1968

³ For details see S.F.Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar 1498-1922, Islamic Societies in the South Asian Frontier*, Oxford, 1980

⁴ Jeyaseela Stephens, Medieval Trade of the Tamil Coast and its Hinterland, AD.1280-1500, *The Indian Historical Review*, Volume. XXXV, No,2, January, 1999, p.14

⁵ V.M.Kutty, Mahakavi Moyin Kutty Vaidyar, Kerala Sahitya Academy, Thrissur, 2007, p. 12

⁶ Hussain Randathani, *Mappila Muslims: a study on society and anti colonial struggles*, Other Books, Kozhikode 2007, p.167. It is a story about an imaginary confrontation of King Zaqqum of Iraq and Prophet Muhammed of Arabia

⁷ Sayyid Fazal, *Uddat al Umara' wal Hukkam li hanta al Kafarata wa 'Abdat al Asnam*, Egypt, 1273/ 1856-57,p.23; There are about fifty war songs in Arabic-Malayalam dialect and most of them came out in later half of nineteenth century and in the first half of twentieth century. These war sons, no doubt, were aimed at encouraging the Mappilas to *jihād*.

⁸ For complete text of the song see K.K.Muhammad Abdul Kareem and K. Abubakkar, *Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyuar Samboorna Kridikal*, Mouin Kutty Vaidyar Smarakam, Kopndotty, 2005, pp.326-477; For Arabic Malayalam text, Ibid.,pp.804-892

⁹ Songs of this type typically narrated the heroic deeds of the Muslims of Kerala and eulogize the martyrs among them, especially in their battles against the Portuguese and British colonial powers and local *Jenmi* landlords. See, *Kerala and her Culture:An introduction*, Indian Historical Records Commission, Printed at the St. Joseph's Press for the Govt. of Kerala, 1971, P. 53

¹⁰ Nambi, is the chieftain of Zamorin, the king of Calicut, See, Dr.N.M Namboodiri, *Malabar Padanangal, Samoodiri Nadu*, State Institute of Language, Thiruvananthapuram, 2008,p.428-429

¹¹ Almost all the Mappila Mappila sources reveal the history of Cheraman Perumal more or less in the same way, though there occurs some chronological differences, See Muhammad bin Malik, *Tarikh Zuhur al Islamfil Malabar*, Mal. Trans. K.K.Muhammad Abdul Karim, Markaz al Ulum Souvenir, Kondotty, 1988, pp. 31-32; Shaikh Zainuddin Makhdam, *Tuhfat al Mujahidin*, Eng.Trans., S.Muhammad Husyn Nainar, Madras, 1942, pp.38-40; Umar bin Muhammad Suhrawardi, *Rihlat al Muluk*, Mal trans., Cheraman Perumal, K.Abdu Rahman , Thrissur, 1958; Herman Gundert, *Keralolpathi*, Balan Publications, Trivandrum, 1961(First Published in 1843), For the Chronological controversy,See, Dr.Hussain Randathani, *Mappila Muslims, A Study on Society and anti Colonial struggles*, Other Books, Calicut,pp.23-33

¹² He is also known as Krishna Munjad

¹³ “പോകട്ടെ നാനും പെൺ ചൊല്ലി കേട്ടു പെരുമാളെ; പൊറുക്കാതെ വൻ പാപം അല്ലെ നീ ചെയ്തതിനാളെ. ആകട്ടെ ദോഷം ഇനി പൊറുക്കണമെങ്കിലോ; ആശു നീ കൂടിക്കോ നാലാം ബേദമിറകിലോ. ബേകത്തിൽ മക്കം പിറക്കും ദൂതർ മുഹമ്മദിൽ; ബീരീദ മുൻ ചെണ്ട് മാർക്കം കൊണ്ട് പുകയ്തേ ദീൻ. ജോകത്തെ ഹജ്ജും നീ ചെയ്കിൽ ദോശം പൊറുക്കുമേ; ചൊല്ലി വ കുറി കേറി മേകത്തിൽ ബെൾകമേ” (Song No.7, Ishal Mi’raj),The story happened at Valarpattanam See K.K.Muhammad Abdul Karim, K.Abubakkar, *Moyin Kutty Vaidyar*,op.cit, pp. 338-45 ഒക്കാ മികത്തോർ ബാൾവധികം മെച്ചം; ഉണ്ടാം പട കൂട്ടം ജർഹ ലച്ചം. ബക്കാദ് അമീറാക്കൾ കസീറാൽ ബാറാ; ബംബർ അദിൽ യേറ്റം മികന്ദോർ ഹോറാം. തക്കോർ മഹാ കോട്ടാ വളർ പട്ടത്ത് താനെ മണി സിംഹാസനവും ബെത്ത്. മിക്കാ ഭരിക്കും നാൾ പെരുമാൾ തന്റെ; മിളിയിൽ കുളിർമ പുമണവി ഒണ്ടെ)

¹⁴ Ibid., p.346

¹⁵ Vaidyar tells us that due to storm the ships lost their way and one of the ships anchored at Madurakkara and the other at Kodungallur (Cranganore) in Malabar, Ibid, p.152

¹⁶ The history of the Malappuram battle is not found in any documents. It was orally transmitted by the people and after about one hundred years Moyin Kutty Vaidyar made a through inquiry into the incident and compiled a war song. See Nainan Kutty, *Malappuram Rakta Sakshikal*, Mujahid Publications, Ernakulam, 1982

¹⁷ The *samantas* had their own principalities called *swarupams*. According to the song there were four *samantas* Mangattachan, Tinayanchery Ilayath, Tammepanicker and Paranambi. Among them Paranambi was the ruler of the *swarupam* including Malappuram. Durin the battle Shankara Nambi was the ruler.K.K.Muhammad Abdul Karim, K.K.Abubakkar, op.cit., p. 354. For details of Zamorin, see K.V. Krishna Ayyar, *The Zamorins of Calicut*, Norman Printing Bureau, Calicut, 1938. N.M.Namboodiri, *Malabar Padanangal*, op.cit.

¹⁸ K.K.Muhammad Abdul Karim and K.K.Abubakkar,op.cit.,p. 357-8; Hussain Randathani, *Mappila Malabar*, Islamic Publishing Bureau, Kozhikode, 2005, p. 91.

¹⁹ K.K.Muhammad Abdul Karim and K.K.Abubakkar, op.cit., p.360

²⁰ Ali Marakkar, a brave and strong man came from Valluvanad along with his friend to visit the mosque. On the way he visited the Nambi who, attracted by his qualities appointed him as his tax collector. Marakkar found that the burden of tax was on the shoulders of the poor and the lords were not paying the tax regularly.

²¹ Ibid., p. 390

²² Ibid., pp.392-424

²³ “തിരിത്തി പോൽ ദുആ ചെയ്താർ ഹിജ്റത് ഊർമദുഃ; തിറം പറ്റേ മദി ശഅ്ബാൻ ശഹ്റ” താസിഉം. തീയതീ ദിനം നല്ല ലൈലതുൽ ജുമുഅ തന്നിൽ” (Ishal, komb,), Ibid., p.430; Dale had put the date as 1738, S.F.Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar, 1498-1922, Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier*, Oxford, 1980, p.75

²⁴ For example : Peduvadina eda eda kadu kaduvakal todutoda kadandudan idapedalay
 Pidikkayum arukkayum adithellu murikkayum odikkayum pedukkayumay
 Chedu cheda qabar yiday tadav adavodu pada badi kodu koduma
 Chinavinil pulikulam ganamugal ida kadndiday bina taram ad pol
 (64, ishal, Thudarakkavi)

²⁵ See Nainan Kutty, *Malappuram Raktasakshikal*, op.cit

²⁶ Husain Randathani, *Mappila Malabar*, op.cit., p.97

²⁷ K.K.Muhammad Abdul Karim and K.Abubakkar, op.cit., pp.478-79

²⁸ C.N.Ahmad Mawlawi and K.K. Muhammad Abdul Kareem, *Mahathaya Mappila Sahitya Parambaryam*, Calicut, 1978,p.387.

²⁹ Dale, op.cit., p.76

³⁰ The art came to be known as *padipparayal* meaning “sing and say”

³¹ C.K. Karim, *Kerala District Gazetteer*, Malappuram, Adoor, K.K. Ramachandran Nair, Ernakulam, 1986, p. 132.

³² H. Hewetson, District Magistrate to the Chief Secretary, 2 May 1896. para, 41.

³³ Hussain Randathani, *Mappila Malabar*, Ibid.,92; See the songs No,14, Ishal Naseehat,No,18, Ishal Tongal, K.K.Muhammad Abdul Kareem, K.Abubakkar, op.cit.,pp. 356-362

³⁴ He was Kunhelu, the gold smith. In the Nercha festival of Malappuram, this gold smith is specially remembered

as “tattante petti” (box of gold smith) in the procession. ‘Malappuram pada,’ *Al Irfad Monthly*, December 1987, p.20.

³⁵ 5th Rabi al Awwal 1300, Song No 71, Ishal Tongal, K.K.Muhammad Abdul Karim and K.K.Abubakkar, op.cit., p.476-479