

# Documentation of Arabic-Malayalam: Linguistic-Cultural Traditions of Mappila Muslims of Kerala

## Brief Introduction

The proposed work seeks to undertake ethnographic documentation of a locally devised language, Arabic-Malayalam of Mappila Muslims of Kerala, which is on the verge of extinction. The focus is also given to record the art forms and cultural traditions of Mappila community which are closely intertwined with this language. The cultural history of Muslims of Northern Kerala, otherwise known popularly as Mappilas, is an odd lot as it stands apart having very little in common with their pan-Indian counterparts. Thanks to the *globality* that the Kerala society possessed for many centuries, Mappilas might have more in common with the Muslims of far-flung Hadramawt or Sumatra than those of North India.

Their culture, of course, represents a notable difference to the general Indian Muslim situation. Even for the Mughal-Urdu traditions which otherwise determines the cultural being of Muslims up north, there are only a few takers in this part. Mappila community's isolation from Indo-Persian Islam is more significant as they have by-passed not only the political sway and tradition of it, but also the cultural heritage and theological affinity. In its place, Mappilas uphold a peculiar cultural hybrid of Arab and Indian descendents. This cultural blend has also been the hallmark of their art and literature. Arabic-Malayalam, which became the vehicle of religious and creative expressions, is the other special achievement of the cultural interface that Mappila life represented for centuries.

Arabic Malayalam is neither Arabic nor Malayalam in the purest sense but a crude mix of both. So, many words and usages, which are alien to both Arabic and Malayalam, can be seen while reading the literary texts in this language. The combination is simply amazing with words from the oriental languages like Arabic and Farsi, from the Indian languages like Urdu and Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada and Thulu. Some scholars consider Arabic-Malayalam yet another dialect of Arabic written in Semitic script with more sophistication given to the letters to accommodate local phonetics. There is a diverse view in which Arabic-Malayalam is treated as a dialect of Malayalam written in Arabic script with suitable changes made in order to accommodate local phonetics. Arabic-Malayalam flourished primarily on account of its use for religious purpose. The use of this language as the medium of instruction in *madrassas* underlines its importance in the religious life of Mappilas. But, Arabic-Malayalam began to move along a different trajectory and gained popularity, when the Mappila population began to express their thoughts, imaginations and feelings in this dialect. The language found fame chiefly among the Mappila women, whose education have been largely confined to *madrassas*.

## 2. Significance of the Study

The popularity of Arabic-Malayalam brought a remarkable change in the orientation of Mappila society and their religion. It facilitated a journey from the rigid traditions of 'revealed religion' to the 'living traditions' of an indigenous Muslim community. There is of course relevance in an in-depth study of indigenous Muslim communities, cultural as well as linguistic specificities they possess and immunities they have acquired in a more globalized world. The present work has a greater significance in the context of a clash that characterizes the cultural life of Muslims of Kerala; between the traditions of pan-Islamism and local tradition.

Moreover, the literature on Arabic-Malayalam remains very scanty. The existing works, generally, fail to measure the extent of dynamism and creative interplay of various cross-cultural elements in the formation of this language.

Similarly, there are not many studies that adequately dealt with this language from socio-linguistic and ethnographic point of view. Keeping this knowledge gap in mind, we would like to carry out the present study in the light of relatively new paradigms.

### **3.Scope**

The scope of the proposed work is to create audio, video, graphic and text documentation material covering use of Arabic-Malayalam language in a variety of social and cultural contexts. There are a number of life-cycle events among Mappila Muslims; among them most prominent are *oppana*, *Vattapattu*, *kolikali*, *nercca*, *kaimuttukali*, *paricamuṭṭukaḷi* etc. This work will document such art forms and cultural performances in which the oral literary tradition of Arabic-Malayalam finds its expression. However, the focus will be limited to the linguistic aspects of such art forms. The scope of this work also includes the documentation of *Mappilapattu* which makes up the large chunk of literary corpus. The documentation involves transcription, translation and transliteration of *mappiḷappaṭṭu*, *padappattu*, *kissapattu*, *kalyanapaatu* or *wedding songs*, *madhu pattukal*, *Vaṭṭappāṭṭu* being disseminated in written and oral forms.

### **4.Research Objectives**

The proposed project's major objective is to document Arabic-Malayalam language and its multitude of literary and cultural expressions. Simultaneous to it, an audio-visual documentation of Mappila art forms, cultural performances, rituals and liturgical practices, which are the theatres of various literary and cultural expressions for this language, would also be carried out. The documentation includes transcription, translation and transliteration of literary works in Arabic-Malayalam being disseminated in oral and written forms.

This study aims to set following broad objectives.

1. To make a detailed socio-linguistic study on the origin, evolution and spread of Arabic- Malayalam language.
2. To acquire a basic understanding of the historical, social as well as cultural context in which Arabic Malayalam gained wider popularity and reach among the Mappila Muslims of Kerala.
3. To make an enquiry into the cross-cultural and linguistic influence on Arabic-Malayalam and trace out the cross-philological base of some of the widely used terms in this language.
4. To document art forms and cultural performances in which the oral literary tradition finds its expression.
5. To study how Arabic-Malayalam constituted a parallel way to understand the reality and knowledge production among Mappilas.
6. To make a research leading to develop a comprehensive classification method for the literary texts and oral compositions considering their structure, language register and literary and stylistic features.
7. To analyze the translations of basic Islamic texts in Arabic to this language with the purpose of understanding the extent of freedom that the translators enjoyed, while interpreting the texts.