

Colonial Modernity, Regret and the Discovery of Mappila Literary Tradition

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Article Received: 02/09/2025

Article Accepted: 01/10/2025

Published Online: 02/10/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.10.46

Abstract

Postcolonial scholarship has rigorously mapped the complex history of colonial subjects' confrontation with modernity and its institutions as it plays a significant role in the formation of the new nation states and the emergence of the public sphere. Communities which had a rich tradition of anti-colonial struggles like the Mappilas of Malabar were sceptical of embracing modernity as it disrupted community ties and traditions. In response to the urges of the reformers, the Mappilas took up colonial education and attempted to integrate themselves with the new nation-state. This led to the emergence of various factions and the approach towards modernity was intensely debated. The revised edition of Mahathaya *Mappila Sahithya Parambaryam* released in 2023 opens up a historical moment which involves multiple layers of the Mappila's engagement with colonial modernity. This article problematises the preface written to the first edition of the book in 1978 by the authors and argues that the confessional tone of the preface reveals certain ambiguities in the reformist discourses and records their regret over lost traditions and attempts to reclaim them.

Keywords: Literary tradition, Modernity, Colonial education, Nation states and public sphere, Community reforms.

Introduction

The encounter with modernity is a defining feature of all postcolonial societies. Inspired by Enlightenment, the presence of English schools in Kerala in the early decades of the 19th century, years before the introduction of the English Education Act of 1835, testifies the state's engagements with colonial modernity and its institutions. This was the result of the combined efforts of the missionaries as well as the Travancore/ Cochin/ British state that provided provisions for the establishment of schools in the state. Though the Basel Mission had established English schools in Malabar, the British government did not have an

education policy in the region which was under its direct rule (PM, 2236). The curriculum of the schools run by the British administration was restricted to reading and writing Malayalam and simple arithmetic. The second half of the 19th century witnessed the British authorities' active involvement in the education process and schools were established in various parts of the region. Following The Wood's Despatch of 1954, universities were initiated in presidency towns including the University of Madras. The introduction and establishment of universities gave way to the emergence of English studies in the state.

Education, like other facets of colonial modernity, was not homogeneously accommodated by various communities in Kerala. Following the ideals of Enlightenment, social groups have appropriated modernity from their socio-political vantage points leading to the formation of alternative modernities. Instead of following the euro-centric notions of the universal individuals, communities have integrated pre-modern identities such as caste, community and gender relations into the structures of modernity creating unequal distribution of power among various groups. This paper analyses how the Mappila community of Malabar, which was directly under British rule, has responded to the universal claims of modernity and its education process from their troubled history of confrontation with colonial forces. Contextualising the reprint of the book *The Glorious Mappila Literary Tradition* published by Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar Mappila Kala Academy under the aegis of Department of Culture, Government of Kerala in 2023, the paper maps the dynamics of the perusal and regret of embracing colonial modernity and its education process and the role of postcolonial thoughts in reclaiming the tradition and heritage of the community without falling out of sight of the benefits of modernity.

Mappila Responses to Colonial Education in Malabar

There are conflicting historical records on the origin and settlements of Mappilas on the Malabar coast and many historians argue that “the Mappilas are the descendants of the first Indian Muslims” (Koya, 2012, p. 195). The Mappilas settled on the coastal area and traded with the Arabs which led to the formation of a hybrid community in the region. The arrival of the European colonial forces on the Malabar coast and their attempts to colonise the land and monopolise trade routes created strong anti-colonial sentiments among the Mappilas and this continued right from the 16th century to the 20th century. The ownership and unequal distribution of land favoured by the feudal lords and patronised by the colonial administration made the life of peasants difficult in general and that of the converted Mappila peasants in particular. As a result, the Mappilas didn't respond favourably to English education initiated by the British government in the second half of 19th century as they continued revolts against the administration.

Mappila's reluctance to embrace English education was also caused by the emergence and popularity of the Arabi-Malayalam dialect. They extensively used the hybrid language form as a medium for cultural, religious and educational transactions for four centuries; this effectively made the language a cultural repository in which the nuances of community living were recorded in the form of popular songs. Beginning with the publication of *Muhyiddin Mala* in 1607, the Arabi-Malayalam literary tradition has a rich

collection of songs and prose writings including histories, religious treatise and details of social practices. The presence of this linguistic form enabled Mappilas to express their cultural experiences in an exclusive language produced by themselves and reject the English language education offered by the colonial government. Though social reformers like Sanaullah Makti Tangal were quick to realise the implications of rejecting English and vernacular Malayalam education in the formation of the nation state, the traditional ulama and members of the community could not reconcile with the aggressive imperialist powers and their promise of a nation state. Eventually, the Mappilas were excluded from the political negotiations that resulted in the formation of the new nation and the linguistic state of Kerala. The century-long Mappila-British confrontations culminated in the tragic events of the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. In the aftermath of the rebellion, the colonial regime trialed, punished and exiled the rebels and their families and in the long silence that followed, Mappilas were introduced to the institutions of modernity including English education. The community consciousness of the Mappilas still lingered and their scepticism towards modernity estranged them further from the discourses of the nation. In the meanwhile, English and vernacular Malayalam education and the introduction of print culture enabled communities in Kerala to take part in the formation of the linguistic state while Mappilas and their dialect were pushed into the periphery. The Mappilas, like other communities on the west coast, failed to fall in line with the norms of the nation state as their anti-colonial struggles and cultural expressions in a hybrid language make it more difficult for them to translate into the new nation.

Confronting Modernity; Perusal and Regret

Muslim social reformers of the 19th century were aware of the complex relationship between Mappilas with their transnational relations and the making of a geographical nation state. As M T Ansari rightly observes Muslims in India found themselves incompatible in the citizen centred nation state (2021). In this context, the community has to shed certain elements of its tradition to fit itself in the frame of the national community. This demand of the nation is not equally applicable to all groups as the contestation for dominance is informed by the cultural capital and hegemony. Vulnerable communities often have to make greater sacrifices in order to take part in the discourse of the nation whereas dominant communities often normalise their cultural values as universal.

The political situation in the aftermath of rebellion made it essential for Mappilas to translate themselves into the national community without carrying over their cultural resources creating sections which found themselves adaptable and those who could not. Those who argued for modern education found the traditional community lacking resources, power and progress whereas the traditional communities identified the liberals mimicking colonial masters. Thus, colonialism effectively splits the identity of the premodern community and imposes an identity on the colonised subject. In other words, Modernity disrupts the flow of traditional epistemology and social development. This creates a social identity which disconnects the individual from the traditions nourished by the community. Due to the consistent efforts of the social reformers and the realisation of the British administration of the need of educating the Mappilas in order to end their political responses

to the colonial administration, various educational reforms and schemes were introduced after the rebellion of 1921.

The spread of education among the Muslim was a result of the mixed responses among the colonial powers after the rebellion of 1921. British officials assumed that educational projects were required to the undeveloped regions which were the hotbed of the revolts including Ernad, Valluvanad etc... in south Malabar. (Thangal, 2023, p. 298)

The progressive sections of the Mappilas were also actively involved in the spread of education and reforming the existing mode of imparting knowledge. The education process involves learning Malayalam, English and modern sciences. In the due course, Arabi- Malayalam dialect and its rich cultural resources were ignored which led to the cultural lack to the educated citizens of the new nation. Empowered by western education and the printing press, various communities in Kerala addressed the challenges of modernity whereas the Mappilas, due to their early rejection of English education, could not integrate their hybrid language and cultural resources into the linguistic state that was in the making. When the embrace of Malayalam introduced by him (Makti Thangal) joined with the nationalist and reformist movement, Mappilas rejected the premodern culture and world view. In brief, this resulted in the rejection of the Arabi-Malayalam dialect and the entire canon of literary productions made in that language...there was no other medium which comprehensively recorded the cultural life of the Mappilas... the right way was not lingering on Arabi-Malayalam or complete rejection of it, instead there would have been concerted efforts to include the cultural terminologies of Mappila dialect in the newly forming Malayalam language. (Aboobakker, 2023, p. 476,477,478)

Though the education process enables the individual to identify with the national community and thus offers them visibility and role in the formation of the linguistic nation, communities such as the Mappilas often have to cut their transnational connections and cultural links to be a part of the national community. At the same time, it forces them to drop elements of their identity that do not fit into the moorings of modernity. This essentially creates a community without any sense of its own identity and those who stick to the traditions are rendered unintelligible.

Discovery of Mappila Literary Tradition

The discovery of a vast repository of traditional cultural productions often breaks the spells of collective amnesia cast by modernity and its institutions and encourages members of the community to reclaim its past. This process often creates ambiguity among members as their position in the national narratives often gets challenged by the existence of premodern knowledge production. These resources can also equip the members to redefine their own subjective position and contextualise traditions within the discourse of modernity. ...and then I was consciously or unconsciously drawn to Mappila literature. I was aware of Mappila literary productions and it made me immensely proud to disprove the common idea of Mappilas as illiterate and prove that they can even produce literature. I decided to do thorough research on Mappila literary traditions. (Moulavi, 2023, p. 712)

This is the moment when C N Ahammed Moulavi, one of the authors of the book *The Glorious Mappila Literary Tradition* (1978) introduces his meeting with Mappila literary traditions. Though he was educated in traditional and modern institutions and produced many books on Islam, the vast repository of Mappila literary traditions were unfamiliar to him. The authors C N Ahammed Moulavi and K.K. Muhamed Abdul Kareem spent two years of intensive study to explore these literary productions. C N Ahammed Moulavi was born in 1932 and attended many traditional and modern centres of learning. He was employed as Religious Instructor in Malappuram training college and propagated the necessity of learning English and Malayalam. In the preface to the book, he traces the origin and development of Mappila community and literary traditions and explains his intention in collaborating to write the book. Prefaces occupy a significant role in contemporary criticism as it “stakes out the border-line between work and world, granting the author momentary respite from the discipline of the text” (Devasia, 1) and a detailed analysis of the prefatory comments will bring out the ambiguities in the conception of tradition and modernity. He testifies that his two yearlong study has convinced him that the Mappilas have a great literary tradition and the Mappilas are unaware of it. This was, according to him, a product of the British propagation which the Mappilas internalised. A close reading of the preface will help us to contextualise his discovery of the glorious literary traditions of the Mappilas and his attempts to reconcile his ideas on modernity. It is true the attraction towards the Mappila literary tradition has disturbed his poise and the preface mediates between the assertion of tradition and the rhetoric of progression.

Moulavi's efforts to reconcile the unacknowledged treasures of Mappila tradition with the progression of modernity creates tensions in the preface. The author shares his excitement in the discovery of the canon of traditional literary production on the one hand and on the other makes sarcastic comments about the traditional ulama and their ignorance. In the same vein, the author laments on the ignorance of the Mappilas of his time and also glorifies the literary tradition which they nourish without being conscious of the role of colonial modernity and its institutions in labelling the people and their tradition unworthy. In this sense, an analysis of conflicting voices in the preface will offer insights into the making of modernity and the reclaiming and adaptations of traditions into the structures of modernity by extending the narrow versions of modernity in the former colonies.

The contradictions implied in the preface falls into four categories; degrading the Arabi-Malayalam dialect and literary productions, approaches towards modern education, criticism of Ulama centred knowledge systems and reappropriation of historical figures. The author of the preface acknowledges the British involvement in degrading the hybrid dialect of the Mappilas and states that it was a project of the colonial forces to underestimate the values of the colonised. His earlier criticism on the traditional schooling system based on Arabi Malayalam gives way to the praise of the system in the preface as the discovery indicates high percentage of literacy among the Mappilas. The preface testifies that the literary tradition has changed his attitude towards the Mappila dialect as he says “the westerners and their supporters who were aware of the greatness of the Mappilas made fun

of the Arabic-Malayalam dialect and some Mappilas also became sceptical of their own heritage” (p. 59). He not only endorses whatever is written in Arbi-Malayalam literature but also ensures that there is nothing degrading about the use of Arabi-Malayalam. It is in fact something to be proud of and the misfortune was that there was no state that encouraged the dialect.

The approach to modern education is much more revealing. He traces the early development of Mappila education and hints at the British attitude to ‘revive’ the Mappilas. As we read, we are made to believe that the author is conscious of the politics of educating Mappilas and is sensitive to the socio-political condition of the Mappilas in the aftermath of the rebellion. But in the history of Mappila education that follows, he becomes less critical of the colonial project and treats government officials with authenticity and power and the willingness of the Ulama to join modern education is discredited. Though the confrontation with modernity cannot be avoided, one cannot miss the superior air of the author while describing traditional knowledge systems. The preface is structured in such a way that it appreciates the literary and cultural heritage of the Mappilas and encourages them to be proud of their past and also makes ambiguous comments on the efforts of people to approach modernity.

The approach towards the traditional ulama and the appropriation of the historical figures such as Mamburam Thangal also require special attention. Though the contributions of Mampuram Sayyid Alavi Thangal and Veliyamkode Umar Khazi are acknowledged in the preface, the following chapter records various practices associated with them as un-Islamic, hence unacceptable. This reveals the author's attempt to negotiate with modernity and the preface reveals the ambivalence towards modernity.

Conclusion

The concerted efforts of social reformers and colonial administration have succeeded in spreading education and developing infrastructure. In this process, the community left behind its vast cultural resources which denied them cultural substance and the potential to negotiate with the national community. The discovery of these cultural traditions upset the existing ideas of reform and the patterns of colonial education and the preface of the book *The Glorious Mappila Literary Tradition* showcases the moment of inventing tradition within modernity.

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