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**MALABARI SCRIPT: AN INTRODUCTION TO  
MARGINALIZED ARABIC SCRIPT IN SOUTH INDIA**

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**Abstract**

*Mappila Muslims of Kerala have a longtime tradition of cultural link with Arab culture. Islam reached Kerala during Prophet Muhammad's era. They keep a distinct culture in terms of identity, dress pattern, folklore, and food habits from that of any other Muslim community in South Asia. We can see an extensive version of Islam in Kerala. Mappila Muslims have regionalised each and every aspect of their life. Extensive regionalisation extensively in art and literature can be seen. They developed their own script, namely, Malabari, for writing Arabic. This script is mainly used for writing Qur'an copies, Fiqh literature, Seera and Qaseedas. Very interestingly, Malabari script also has vernacular version, it is used to write the alphabets of local language Arabi-Malayalam. Extensive numbers of literatures are there in Arabic Malayalam version of Malabari Script. This paper is to search for the origin, development and current status of Malabari or Ponnani script of Mappila Muslims of Malabar.*

*In order to carry out this research, mainly qualitative methods will be used, which include study of literature, Manuscripts, Articles etc. This also includes interviews with experts in the subject, field visiting etc.*

**Keywords:** Arabi-Malayalam, Malabar, Malabari Script, Mappila Muslims

**Introduction**

In the Muslim history of south India, the Muslims of Kerala, better known as, Mappila Muslims have a decisive role that marks and differentiates them from other Muslim communities even in South Asia. Since Islam reached Kerala during the period of Prophet Mohammed, through his disciples, they had a very long cultural connection with the Arabs and Muslim culture. Engaging with this, Mappila Muslims could even make their own culture and identity in terms of their dress pattern, language (Both oral and written), food habits, folklore, literature and so on.

As Islam became dynamic in Kerala, they integrated their religion to the region of Kerala and thus massive regionalisation of Islam happened in their culture over the time. In art and folklore, they have *Oppanappattu, Daffmuttu, Kolkkali* and so on, which are

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practiced at festival seasons or on special occasions like marriage, circumcision etc. These art forms developed from their cultural interaction with the native people of Kerala. Similarly, in literature they could form their own language for various temporal needs, which is known as Arabi-Malayalam. This language is a blend of Malayalam and Arabic, in which, Malayalam language is written with Arabic letters. They had even made their own letters to cope up with this. Thus, Arabi- Malayalam has 35 letters, while Arabic has only 29 letters.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from Arab- Malayalam language, they also developed a script for writing Arabic letters, known as Malabari script, which will be focus in this study. There is a plenty of literature in this script that had decisive role in determining the Mappila literature. Unfortunately, this script is at the verge of extinction due to several factors.

### **Origin and Early Development of Malabari Script**

Different languages have their own way of writing Arabic. Turkish has its own way of writing Arabic. *Kufic*, *Nastaliq*, *Sulus* are all different ways of writing Arabic. Similarly, Malabari is a way of writing Arabic developed in Kerala.

From the birth of Arabi-Malayalam till its peak period, the literatures written in this language were mostly in Malabari script. Although, the entire corpus of Arabi Malayalam literatures were not written in Malabari script, but checking the archival records<sup>2</sup>, it is to be concluded so. Since, Malabari script was the only popular and renowned script even though there was less presence of *Kufic* script. So, the history of Malabari script is also the history of Arabi-Malayalam as well. Arabi-Malayalam was found at the time when Malayalam language didn't have a script of its own<sup>3</sup>. In my opinion, we can comprehend the birth of Malabari script, only through understanding the reasons for the birth of Arabi-Malayalam. Concerning the birth of Arabi-Malayalam, P.K. YasserArafat, an expert and researcher in the field argues that:

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<sup>1</sup> See, Tharuvana, Azeez (2018, September 28). Arabi Malayalam. Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.sahapedia.org/arabi-malayalam-3>

<sup>2</sup> Archives that of Mappila Heritage Library at CH chair, Calicut University, archives of MoyinKutti Vaidyar Memorial, Kondotty, Archives at Jifri House, Calicut

<sup>3</sup> Saqafi, Ali(2015), Mappila MalabarinteSahityaPaithrkam, Calicut: Poomkavanam Books

Scholars of pre-modern languages and scripts argue that tracing the invention of scripts should always go beyond the personal interests and inspirations of a single scribe since these evolve through multiple hands over a period of time. Hence, the credit for inventing the Arabi-Malayalam script must be sought in the voluntary acts of a number of polyglossic native Muslim scribes with linguistic and scriptorial creativity. Their increasing familiarity with the Arabic script, Islamic texts, hortatory practices and theological discourses over centuries is likely to have played an important role in the evolution of this transliterative system for registering polyglossic coastal Malayalam in extended Arabic alphabets.

There were many reasons for the birth of this language. As Arafath assumed familiarity as a reason, this familiarity might have grown due to the trade relations of Mappila with Arabs. Another reason was ‘scriptorial exigency’<sup>4</sup> during the age of *fasad*<sup>5</sup>, the age of Portuguese invasion. Though this language is popularly known as Arabi-Malayalam, renowned Malayalam poets like Ulloor, Shooranad, called it as Mappila Malayalam, since it was Mappila version of writing Malayalam<sup>6</sup>.

Coming to the birth of Malabari script, much historical evidences are not available regarding this. However, it is said that, Sayyid Alavi Thangal, who is better known as Mampuram Thangal, (A Yemeni descendant of Prophet Mohammed) is the first person to write in Malabari script. He gave a Qur’an written in his own handwriting in this script, to a layman named Pazhayadath Kunjimoytheen, an inhabitant of Kodoor, Malappuram. Malabari script (*Khatt Malabari* in Arabic) is also known as Ponnani script (*Khatt Funnani* in Arabic) since, it originated and developed at a place known as Ponnani, which is

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<sup>4</sup> Arafath, P. K. Y. (2018). Malabar Ulema in the ShafiiteCosmopolis: Fitna, Piety and Resistance in the Age of Fasad. The Medieval History Journal, 21(1), 25–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971945817750506>

<sup>5</sup> In Malabar, prominent Ulemas, like Qadi Muhammed, categorised the 16th century as the era of *fasad* (disorder and catastrophe) after experiencing massive violence, social tensions and moral disturbance with the Portuguese invasion. For more see, Arafath, P. K. Y. (2018). Malabar Ulema in the ShafiiteCosmopolis: Fitna, Piety and Resistance in the Age of Fasad. The Medieval History Journal, 21(1), 25–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971945817750506>

<sup>6</sup> See, Tharuvana, Azeez (2018, September 28). Arabi Malayalam. Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.sahapedia.org/arabi-malayalam-3>

known as, the Mecca of Malabar<sup>7</sup>. This script is also known as Arabi-Malayalam script, because it was the only popular script for writing Arabi-Malayalam. Though common usage is Ponnani script, some call this script as *Valiyaksharam*, which means big letters. This is because the letters of this script are written with prolonged lines and curves<sup>8</sup>. Malabari script is also a form of Arabic calligraphy and can be identified as blend of scripts like Rayhani, Muhaqq, and Kufi.

Muslims all over the world believed that Qur'an, as their holy book should be written in best form, art, and manner. So, when Malabari script was introduced, it was mostly used to write Qur'an copies as it is a calligraphic form of script. The Qur'an written in this format was known as *Malabari Mushaf*. These Qurans were printed at press and were distributed all over Kerala and further, exported to neighboring states of Kerala like Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and so on. 'Tirurangadi Muhammed Kutti and Sons press' was one of the highest leading printing presses in this matter. Hence, a generation who read Qur'an in this language calls it as the Quranic script. Later on massive Mappila literature, especially religious literatures were written in this script. Both Qur'an and religious literatures made the script much popular in the society. The birth of Arabi- Malayalam was also caused by the surge of *Futhiya Islam* (New Islam)<sup>9</sup>, which means an age of large scale conversion to Islam. The Ulema of the period feared that these converts would fail from understanding Islam. So, they decided to write the teachings of Islam in Arabi-Malayalam with Malabari script, the popular script of the time. This also played a role in the development of the script<sup>10</sup>.

The styles and forms of Malabari script were formed and developed over years. The Qur'an written by Mampuram Thangal was thin in style, but later on, it developed to be thick in style and format. It was Mampuram Thangal himself who initiated the reformation in the script. Along with him, his son Fadl Pookkoya Thangal, Umer Qazi, Parappanagadi Aukoya Musliyar, Abdurahman Makhdhoom, Shujai Moithu Musliyar, Mammad

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<sup>7</sup> Moulavi, K. A (2014), Arabi Ezhuth Samagra Padanam, Malappuram: Dirasa Publications

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Muhiyuddinmala, p. 12, printed in 1876 by M. Koyali Haji at Telicherry

<sup>10</sup> Yasser Arafath, P. (2020). Polyglossic Malabar: Arabi-Malayalam and the Muhiyuddinmala in the age of transition (1600s–1750s). *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 30(3), 517-539. doi:10.1017/S1356186320000085

Sahib, Muhammed NuhKann Musliyar, were the reformers of Malabari script.

### **Arabi-Malayalam Literature, Religiosity and Malabari Script**

Though, copies of Quran were the one to be written in this script at initial stage, a massive and large-scale Mappila literatures ranging from hagiography, liturgies, biographies, litanies, eulogies, and other religious texts were written later. The period after the birth of this script was a period of chaos and disorder for several reasons. But the literatures produced in this period, created a feeling of belongingness, piety and religiosity in Islam. According to P. K. Yasser Arafath,

Beginning in the early-seventeenth century, Arabi-Malayalam texts played a part in strengthening the evolution of Islamic micro ritual spaces in the new agrarian hinterlands. These texts and their oral transmission proved decisive in shaping a number of what we might term as ‘Mappila habitus’ across the region.<sup>11</sup>

Portuguese invaded Kerala and began hitting Muslim very bad with violence and cruelty. Many were martyred in the confrontation against them. Muslims were in such desperation that they couldn’t even think of breathing on their own. In this situation, the *Ulema* intervened to ease up the social tensions. They came with a plenty of literature on zikr (religious chanting and prayers) and other rituals, advices on how to cope up with miserable situations. At some juncture, there were *fatwas* (religious rulings) to withstand and confront the Portuguese invasion<sup>12</sup>. Sheikh Zainuddin Makhdoomi, a renowned scholar of the time wrote a book, titled, *Thahreelu Ahlill manala Jihadi Abadatissulban*, inspiring the fighters and their fighting against Portuguese<sup>13</sup>. Written in the Malabari script, this text got widespread attention, thus mobilizing the Muslims against the Portuguese atrocity.

This was also a time when community saw a surge of ‘*Futhiya Islam*’, as stated above, litanies, biographies and religious texts

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<sup>11</sup> Yasser Arafath, P. (2020). Polyglossic Malabar: Arabi-Malayalam and the Muhiyuddinmala in the age of transition (1600s–1750s). *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 30(3), 517-539. doi:10.1017/S1356186320000085

<sup>12</sup> Saqafi, Ali(2015), *Mappila Malabarinte Sahitya Paithrkam*, Calicut: Poomkavanam Books

<sup>13</sup> Tharuvana, Azeez (2018, September 28). Arabi malayalam. Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.sahapedia.org/arabi-malayalam-3>

were written to encounter this issue. There was a wide acceptance among the converts such that they could comprehend and practice Islam from authentic sources.

Between these periods there was a time, in which Kerala faced small pox, plague and other deadly diseases. Neither there were medicines nor any preventive measures. Thousands of people died each day. In order to prevent this, Sheikh Zainuddin Makhdoom penned a Moulid, a type of literature which praised Prophet Mohammed named *Manqoos Moulid*. People would recite this *Moulid* everyday with their families and friends and believed that this *Moulid* can prevent those deadly diseases. Moreover, many eulogies like Muhyudhin Mala, Rifae Mala, glorifying great Sufis like Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jeelani and Sheikh Rifae, were written in Arabi- Malayalam. These texts became so popular that these were recited in every household every day and it was assumed that its recitation would act as a protection from evil, and other accidents. All these texts written in Malabari script had an important role in the Muslim life and every household woman could read and write in this script and language<sup>14</sup>.

### **Technicalities of Malabari Script**

As stated earlier, Malabari script just than being merely a script also served as a calligraphic form. Some even assume that, Malabari script is a great gift of Mappila Muslims to the field of Arabic calligraphy. ‘This script has simplicity, moderation, constancy and aesthetical sense’<sup>15</sup>, Says Kakkad. P. Abdulla Moulavi, a renowned calligrapher in Kerala. Alike, other scripts of Arabic, Malabari script is highly systematic. Dr. PA Aboobaker, an expert and researcher in the field of Arabi- Malayalam argues that this script also a scientific one<sup>16</sup>.

At a simple gaze, Malabari script would have a few resemblances with Kufic script. But there are many rules and systems for writing this. Many rules were added later on. Starting from writing right to left, this script can be used for writing both Arabic and Arabi- Malayalam.

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<sup>14</sup> Saqafi, Ali(2015), Mappila Malabarinte Sahitya Paithrkam, Calicut: Poomkavanam Books

<sup>15</sup> Moulavi, K. A (2014), Arabi Ezhutth Samagra Padanam, Malappuram: Dirasa Publications

<sup>16</sup> Aboobaker, P.A(2018, July), Mappilayude Mozhiyadayalanganl, Pachakuthira monthly Magazine, Kerala

Malabari script is an *Abjad* system<sup>17</sup> of writing in which each symbol or glyph stands for consonant, in effect leaving it to readers to infer or otherwise supply an appropriate vowel<sup>18</sup>. The script is also used to write some minor languages like *Jesri* and *Eranadan*.

Apart from other *Rasmul Uthmani* (also known as Usmani script), Malabari script follows a method of writing as per recitation. That is, every person who knows reading the letters in Malabari script can simply read Malabari Mushafs. But, in case of Usmani script, which replaced the Malabari script is written with a different method. One who knows to read letters in Usmani script cannot claim to read Qur'an, because some letters are silent in writing format. For example, in Usmani script, *Rahmān*, a word in the beginning of every chapter of Qur'an, is written as *Rahman* (رحمن), but recited as *Rahmān*. But in Malabari script, both the writing and recitation conforms to each other.

Sine, it has been mentioned above about the calligraphic aspect of Malabari script, it also had some other benefits. A major part of the literatures produced in Arabi- Malayalam is poetry. Some poets who wrote in Malabari script used the script to illustrate the aesthetical meaning through the script with its prolonged lines and curves. Many sufi poems, devotional poems had had benefited conveying their essence this way<sup>19</sup>.

### **Transition, Marginalization and Extinction of Malabari Script**

From the birth of Malabari scripts itself, it was not preserved well. Only the Qur'an written in this script was a way of preservation, since Muslims believe that Qur'an should not be burned or destroyed unless there is genuine reason like high difficulty in preservation. Even though the Arabi-Malayalam itself was highly popular, no foreign travellers or the foreign literatures, written in the period mentions about it. P.K. Yasser Arafat expresses his concern over the presence and popularity over Arabi- Malayalam, even in the time said to be its peak. In his words:

“If Arabi-Malayalam had evolved as a stable and fully fledged script before the sixteenth century, how could its

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<sup>17</sup> Yasser Arafath, P. (2020). Polyglossic Malabar: Arabi-Malayalam and the Muhiyuddinmala in the age of transition (1600s–1750s). *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 30(3), 517-539. doi:10.1017/S1356186320000085

<sup>18</sup> *Abjad*". Oxford English Dictionary (Online ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Moulavi, K. A (2014), *Arabi Ezhutth Samagra Padanam*, Malappuram: Dirasa Publications

existence have escaped the notice of a range of reconnoitring Muslim travellers who visited Malabar from across the medieval world? For instance, Ibn Battuta—who recorded in detail a number of urban Muslim settlements, educational systems, Islamic scholars and their intellectual making across Malabar in the fourteenth century—made no reference to it. Similarly, AbdurRazzaq, the mid-fifteenth-century visitor, who promised his readers that he would provide them with all relevant matters worthy of mention, was no different.”

One of the reasons for this may be the absence of documents in Arabi-Malayalam. This would also undermine the popularity of Malabari script.

Apart from the fact that Arabi- Malayalm was not preserved, Malabari script itself faced a huge existential crisis. After the gulf migration of Mappila Muslims of Kerala, Malabari scripts faced a detrimental situation. Along with the gulf money and gulf culture, copies of Quran printed in Gulf countries also came to the household of Mappila Muslims<sup>20</sup>. As gulf copies came, it replaced Malabari Mushafs with its popularity and easiness in reading. Though, there are more rules than Malabari script, Uthmani script was easy to learn and write. Thus, advent of Gulf Qur'an led to the marginalization of Malabari script<sup>21</sup>.

There were many reasons for the marginalization of Malabari script. In the era of Third caliph of Islam Uthman ibn Affan(r), there was a disorder in the recitation of Qur'an among the Muslim community. People started to read Qur'an with different recitations and wrote Qur'an in different versions. Understanding this chaotic situation, the caliph ordered the scholars of Qur'an to write an authentic version of Qur'an both in terms of script and recitation, and to forfeit and destroy all other versions of Qur'an. An authentic version of Mushaf was written and circulated among the Muslim community. This Qur'an was known as Uthmani Mushaf. And it is this Qur'an that came to Kerala as Gulf Qur'an.

Quite after the advent of gulf Mushafs, it replaced the Malabari Mushafs, thus replacing the Malabari script with Usmani script. Malabari script was popular only in Kerala and its neighboring states like Karnataka, Tamilnadu, and Andhra Pradesh. While Uthmani script was globally accepted as authentic

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<sup>20</sup> Aboobaker, P.A(2018, July), MappilayudeM ozhiyadayalangan, Pachakuthira monthly Magazine, Kerala

<sup>21</sup> Saqafi, Ali(2015), Mappila Malabarinte Sahitya Paithrkam, Calicut: Poomkavanam Books



among the Muslim community. Moreover, those who go overseas, for job in gulf countries or for Hajj, would encounter gulf copies of Qur'an and face difficulty to read it, since they had practiced reciting Qur'an in Malabari script. Another reason was the authenticity of the written script of Qur'an. Uthmani Mushafs popular now, are based on the script written by the Khattat Usman Thaha. Malabari Mushafs as such has no authentic source of writing. An important reason behind the marginalization is the religious enactment of Ulema of Kerala. Since, Malabari script is not much authentic in writing aspect; Ulema find lot of mistakes in the Malabari Mushaf. Thakiyudheen Ali, an inhabitant of Lakshadeep, says that, Malabri script was highly popular in Lakshadeep. Ulema, who found the mistakes in Malabari Mushaf, went to each household and forfeited those Qur'ans and destroyed them, and convinced them to use gulf copies of Quran.

Even after the Uthmani Mushafs replaced Malabar Qur'an, there were many religious texts written in this script. In addition to this, it was the official script of Muslims taught in Madrassas. But the British intervention in the education of Muslims in the 19<sup>th</sup> century replaced Arabi-Malayalam language with Malayalam. The Madrasa systems that were not effected with British intervention transformed from Malabari script to Uthmani script, for its popularity and easiness of learning<sup>22</sup>.

Though originated in Kerala, both the Malabari script and Arabi-Malayalam are predominantly used in Malaysia and Singapore by migrant Mappila Muslim community<sup>23</sup>. Not much documents or texts are available in this script unless in few archives. However, litanies like *Eadu*, that of 3333 *vakaEadu*, or 313 *vaka* are even now available in markets mostly in Malabari script. Not much steps have been taken to preserve Malabari script, the script that produced a plenty of literature, and was a decisive in the life of Muslims at some period, is now at the verge of extinction.

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<sup>22</sup> Saqafi, Ali (2015), Mappila Malabarinte Sahitya Paithrkam, Calicut: Poomkavanam Books

<sup>23</sup> Tharuvana, Azeez (2018, September 28). Arabi malayalam. Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.sahapedia.org/arabi-malayalam-3>

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