

“From Biriyani to Adiyanthiram: The Role of Marriage Feasts, Lavish Salkarams, and Birth-Death Rituals in Fostering Mappila Muslim Community Identity”

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	<p>The Mappila Muslim community of South Malabar, a region in North Kerala, has tightly integrated food practices into the fabric of its identity, reflecting a particular combination of Islamic values and indigenous Malabar traditions. This article, titled “From Biriyani to Adiyanthiram: The Role of Marriage Feasts, Lavish Salkarams, and Birth-Death Rituals in Fostering Mappila Muslim Community Identity” investigates how the mappila community ties and cultural identity in modern Kerala have been formed by culinary traditions like Salkarams (lavish feasts), marriage feasts, and rituals surrounding birth and death. Drawing from socio-cultural practices, these food traditions served as tools for social networking, promoting equality, and creating a sense of belonging. Although rooted in religious merit, such as providing feasts to friends, these practices expose conflicts with reformist Islamic ideals, highlighting a dynamic interactions between tradition and faith. This paper emphasizes the importance of food in the Mappila Muslim identity.</p> <p>Keywords: Mappila Muslims, Salkarams, Marriage Feasts, Birth and Death Rituals, South Malabar.</p>

Introduction

In the beautiful landscapes of South Malabar, North Kerala, the Mappila Muslim minority has flourished for generations, forging an identity that integrates with the tenets of Islamic faith and the indigenous Malayalee culture. Within the coconut trees and rich air of spices, food exceeds typical dietary habits, serving as a powerful symbol of community, kinship, and celebration. The Mappilas, descendants of Arab merchants and local converts, have established a culinary tradition that reflects their dual descent, integrating Islamic rules with indigenous customs from the Malabar Coast. A combination is clearly visible in their practices related to Salkarams (lavish feasts), wedding celebrations, and rites associated with birth and death, each contributing to the rich fabric of their socio-cultural identity in the Modern Kerala centuries.

Salkarams, the extravagant dinner events, reflect Mappila food culture, lifting beyond culinary pleasure to serve as an essential part of communal solidarity. These feasts, not exclusively Islamic nor completely indigenous, represent a distinctive Mappila innovation, inviting friends instead of relatives to broaden and enhance social networks. Marriage feasts, characterized by the presence of Biriyani and rich dishes, symbolize the culmination of marriage and the union of families, representing both financial status and community pride. Food customs surrounding birth and death—such as celebratory tonsure feasts and the solemn third-day kannook following a burial—illustrate a society that commemorates life and respects death via communal meals, frequently incorporating elements from adjacent Hindu traditions while maintaining Islamic charitable practices.

There are many intricacies to this relationship between food and identity. Local traditions and the Mappilas' strict commitment to religious obligations, such as the practice of offering feasts as a form of merit, coexist, which can lead to tensions with more modern Islamic principles. Researchers such as Caroline and Filippo Osella have pointed out that Salkarams promote tolerance and solidarity, but the gendered custom of males eating before women invites inquiries over the relative merits of tradition and modernity. The extravagant nature of these feasts, however, has come under fire from reformist Muslims who follow the teachings of

Prophet Muhammed and advocate humility. In spite of these conflicts, the Mappilas continue to enjoy eating as a sacred ritual, a way to celebrate new beginnings, honour the dead, and bring comfort to those who are grieving.

The article examines the influence of these food customs on the formation of Mappila Muslim identity in South Malabar. This study investigates Salkarams, marriage feasts, and birth and death ceremonies to reveal how food customs have strengthened social networks, navigated cultural identities, and fostered a unique Mappila culture. Based on the historical traditions of the 19th and 20th centuries, these customs emphasize the Mappilas' ability for adaptation and innovation, providing food a lens for examining their communal development. The study tries to explore a narrative of resilience, unity, and identity rooted in each meal by examining the fragrances of Thalassery Biriyaani, the sweetness of Aleesa, and the significance of Adiyanthiram feasts.

Salkarams: The Lavish Feasts of Friendship

Malabar Mappilas have introduced a peculiar Mappila culinary art through the innovations in food and beverage culture¹. As Muslims social customs of Mappilas are blend of both local and Islamic elements. While religious obligations are followed as a must for Mappilas, indigenous and hereditary ceremonies are very much a conventional practice. Most times the local and the Islamic cultural paths don't contradict each other, but when they do one of them gains an upper hand. Owing to this peculiar condition certain unique customs have resulted within Mappilas in connection with marriage, birth and death, and lavish feasts. Some of which is neither part of the Islamic nor a part of the local character. For example the chains Salkarams (lavish feasts) in connection with the marriage are neither Islamic nor local, but are a very integral part of Mappila food culture. Offering a feast to friends is an act of religious merit for Muslims which is very much evident in the holding of parties like Salkarams (dinner functions)². In Malabar, if you are newly married, you cannot spend a week, especially during honey moon period, without attending 4 or 5 Salkarams. It is a customary practice among Mappila families to invite and bless the newly married people by hosting a Salkaram having variety of food stuffs. It is also helpful for everyone gets to know each other a little better. Among the Calicut koyas, who follows matrilineal system, the 40 day long serving of breakfast to Puthiyapla or groom is a famous practice³.

Caroline Osella, and Filippo Osella have studied immensely about Salkaram and wrote on the various aspects of Salkarams in a vivid manner. As a focal point of Mappila food culture, Salkaram is specifically organized to bring together friends, rather than family, and is one way in which Muslims' strong social networks are maintained, expanded and intensified⁴. A normal Salkaram party includes various guests. It may host at home or in restaurants. At some Salkarams it is unlikely to know all the people each other. At a house-based Salkaram, when everything for the meal is ready, the hostesses lay out on a large table in the central hall of the house with a range of dishes, sweet and savoury. Definitely Malayalees have to follow certain religious rules and conduct regarding eating style⁵. The very practice of inviting non-family members home, or of visiting unrelated people in order to eat in their homes, and of expecting people unknown to each other to sit together and eat together, is highly important. It underlines a sense of equality, a desire for sociable community, and a belief that food is a legitimate pleasure which should be enjoyed and shared in company. It is to remember that in all Salkarams men take food first followed by the women. This is explicitly clear in all the functions organized at Mappila household regardless of the number of attendees. I don't know why Feminists are keeping mum against this kind of discrimination. At the same time among wealthy and educated Muslims buffet-style of serving food is normally practiced which is a recent addition to the style of dining in Malabar.

At a Salkaram there will always be variety of Biriyaani especially chicken, Beef or mutton, ghee rice, porotta, pathiri and chapathi, fried rice, fried chicken and Beef, chicken curry, fish fry, variety of side dishes etc depending up on the economic status and ethos. There will be pickles and coconut chutney, two or more puddings, salad and cut fruit and finally Aleesa and Mysore banana. Biriyaani is a must for Muslim celebrations. It is set of rice based food made with spices, rice, and meat, fish, eggs, or vegetables. It was brought to the Indian subcontinent by Muslim travellers and merchants. One local variant of Biriyaani, that is thalassery Biriyaani is popular among keralites. Earlier Biriyaani was used only for Marriage and Salkarams by Muslims alone in Kerala but today the scenario has been changed. All other community today prepare and consume Biriyaani⁶. Similarly Malabar Porotta with Beef curry is also popular among the Mappilas. There are some Mappila songs regarding the bride Salkaram by aunt and Mappila culinary⁷. Pulikottil Hyder, a famous Mappila song writer of 20th century has written Mappila songs about *chayamakani* of Malabar⁸. The Ammayippaattu, a form of Mappilapattu is about various Mappila sweets and drinks⁹. The lavishness of Salkaram is always subjected to the criticism by reformist Muslims who wanted to simplify all the Muslim celebrations in a way that is, actually, taught by Prophet Muhammed.

Marriage Feasts: A Culinary Celebration of Union

One of the highlights of Mappila food culture is the variety of food served for the guests during the Mappila weddings. Irrespective of one's economic background, whether rich or poor, a Mappila has to spend a huge amount of money for the wedding feast since Mappila marriage is consummated only after holding the wedding function called Kalyanam, though the Mappilas strictly follow the Islamic system of marrying by doing the

Nikah ¹⁰. The food culture in connection with the Mappila marriage was started just after fixing of marriage between the two families. In the earlier period, at the time of marriage engagement, there were exchange of various food stuffs including variety of sweets ¹¹. Lavish and luxuries lunch on the wedding day is served for the invitees including family, friends, neighbours, relatives and other important people of the locality. A normal wedding feast may attend around 400 people apart from the dinner party organized for the grooms friends and family on the night before the wedding day. People normally prefer non-veg than vegetarian at marriage parties. Special areas have been arranged for providing vegetarian food both at home and auditoriums where marriage is held.

The basic Malabar Mappila wedding menu includes welcome drink served to the guests as soon as they arrive, Biriyani as essential as the bride and the groom, payasam, sweet Sulaimani tea etc. An evening reception including tea, delicious fried and snack stuffs are also have been arranged for the close relatives of the bride family at the groom's house. It is to be noted here that for a luxurious feast require a lot of decision making process especially who will be the chef, the menu, and side dishes etc. since the guests will only be happy if they get delicious feast. That is why at most care has been taken to the wedding feasts. Abida Rasheed, a famous Calicut based Chef has explained the attitude of Mappilas towards marriage feasts by saying that if you cannot cook for your guests, don't invite them home ¹².

Birth and Death Rituals: Food at Life's Threshold

Like any other community the birth of a child for Mappilas is an occasion to celebrate and thank God. What is the common way of celebration? No doubt, holding a party at home or in restaurant. Even before mother gave birth to child, there are ceremonies organized when the pregnancy reached about 7 months period which is called 'Palla kaanal chandang'. During the period of pregnancy close family relatives particularly women used to visit the pregnant lady by carrying fruits and other items. Among the Calicut Koyas, there is a dish called kritha which is prepared in connection with the first pregnancy ¹³. As in the other areas, there are traditional beliefs among Malabar Mappilas regarding specific food items a pregnant woman should or should not eat during pregnancy time. For example Papaya should not be taken during pregnancy. The most common reason given for avoiding papaya during pregnancy is its quality of being hot and inducing abortion ¹⁴.

Tonsure is also an occasion where one can see the interesting facets of Mappila food culture. At the time of 'Mudikalichil' ceremony or tonsure, normally a lavish breakfast and also a big lunch party, normally chicken Biriyani with Beef fry, will be arranged at the mother's home if the child is the first baby of the parent. The very moment Barber start shaving the head of new born baby, Molla also cut the neck of either Beef or Goat as Vulihiyath or sacrifices for God in the name of newly born baby simultaneously. Later meat of the sacrificed animal will be distributed among relatives, friends and neighbours. Meat also used for the lunch party as a side dish in the form of Beef fry ¹⁵. If the baby is a girl, apart from the aforesaid customs, the practice of piercing the ear or kaathukuthal is also an occasion for Mappilas to celebrate with feasts. Renowned Mappila poet Pulikkottil Hyder has written a poem against this evil practice, saying how it deformed young girls, and made them suffer so much pain. Like kaathukuthal, the day of circumcision of a boy is a day of much joy and happiness for the family. Earlier it was performed by a Ossan or barber but today this procedure is conducted at the hospital ¹⁶. Close relatives use to visit the boy after circumcision with sweets and cloths. Circumcision is not compulsory for a person who converts to Islam, but they normally prefer to do it, hence the name 'Markakalyanam' (rite to join the new faith) ¹⁷.

When a Mappila die, there are some rituals to be performed after the burial ceremony. On the day of death, the family members abstain from food. the second day, food is being prepared in the neighbour's house. But on the 3rd day (*kannook*) elaborate feast is arranged in the house itself, with which the mourning ends. Members of the bereaved family weep aloud sitting in front of the dead body ¹⁸. On the third day after death, the relatives visit the house of dead man carrying banana, coconut, halva, bakery item etc. and at mosque special prayer is performed just after Maghreb prayers. Tea, halva and coconut pieces brought by the relatives are distributed among the attendees. This practice is also common among Thiyya Hindu community of Kerala ¹⁹. On the 40th day another function called the Adiyanthiram is conducted. On this occasion food is distributed to the poor and a feast is organised at home for close relatives ²⁰. Though in Islam these customs have no place, these are the influence of local Hindu practices ²¹.

Synthesis and Tensions in Identity Formation

Food appears as a dynamic force in the formation of Mappila communities, covering Salkarams, marriage feasts, and birth-death rituals. It marks life's transitions with birth and death customs, promotes equality as evidenced by the social ethos of Salkarams, and strengthens alliances through wedding feasts. The preparation and sharing of biryani, porotta, and aleesa recall centuries of cultural exchange with Arab traders and local customs, transcending their culinary functions to become symbols of Mappila heritage. This identity is dynamic, though. Although buffet-style dining among the wealthy indicates adaptation, the gendered dining order—men eating before women—conflicts with contemporary ideals. Reformist criticisms of extravagance highlight the conflict between faith and tradition, but the Mappilas' tenacity in upholding these customs shows

how resilient they are. They created a unique identity that thrived in the sociocultural environment of South Malabar by navigating their dual heritage through food.

Conclusion

With salkarams, marriage feasts, and birth-death rituals as essential components, the Mappila Muslims of South Malabar have used the chemistry of food to create a vibrant sense of community identity. These customs went beyond simple sustenance in the 19th and 20th centuries, evolving into rituals of connection that combined Malabar's regional flavour with Islamic piety. Salkarams extended the community beyond family ties by promoting equality and sociability through their sumptuous spreads and emphasis on friendship. While birth and death customs, such as tonsure feasts and Adiyanthiram, marked life's milestones with shared meals, combining local Hindu influences with Islamic charity, marriage feasts, replete with Biriyanis and communal joy, celebrated unions while asserting status in society.

However, this culinary culture is a negotiation site. Reformists' criticism of the extravagant wedding feasts and Salkarams shows a community striking a balance between tradition and faith, while gendered customs point to changing social norms. However, continued function of food as a binding agent and acceptable pleasure highlights how important it is to Mappila identity formation. A story of a people who, with each feast, solidified their place in the history of South Malabar, is told by the persistent aromas of Thalasseri Biryani and the sweetness of Aleesa. It is a monument to tenacity, solidarity, and the unbreakable bonds formed over a shared plate.

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