

RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE MAPPILA LETTER SONGS: ANALYSING A GENRE OF MIGRATION

MOHAMED SHAFEEQ K

Karinkurayil House, Tholavanur (P.O.), Valanchery, Malappuram Dist., Kerala



MOHAMED SHAFEEQ K

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploration of the letter songs among the Mappilas of Kerala in the second half of the twentieth century. The letter songs are an indication of simultaneous deprivation and accumulation of power. On the one hand it displays a jealous guarding of boundaries, thus establishing the kernel of a capitalist economy, thus signaling a transformation from the earlier anti-capitalist ethic which characterized the community, and a newly acquired material prosperity. The locus of these contradictions is the figure of the wife.

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Mappilapaattu, or the song culture of the Mappila Muslims, remains outside any of the classical/national fold. In vogue for centuries, this song culture has withstood the need for notation by its characteristic simplicity –the tunes are fixed and named, which is then indicated just below the title of the song. These tunes are those followed in the *Badr mala* composed by MoinkuttyVaidyar (1857-1891). The songs are written keeping the tunes in mind. With no music schools dedicated to teaching of this musical tradition, one can say that Mappilapaattu is a song culture of memory, kept alive by the religious pedagogy/entertainment, and to some extent because of its inclusion as an event in the State youth festival, the most rigorous and prestigious cultural event of the state. Mappila Kala Akademi in Thrissur is the only centre which imparts training in the Mappila songs another major archival

centre being MoinkuttyVaidyarSmarakam in Kondotty of Malappuram. The song culture has been in existence for more than four hundred years and is divided into many genres –*kalyanapaattu* (wedding songs), *Neerchapaattu* (festival songs), *padapaattu*(war songs), *kissapaattu*(ballad), *seerapaattu*(historical songs), etc.

Letter songs¹

¹BalakrishnanVallikunnu and Umar Tharamel identify the simplicity of language as the most prominent feature of letter songs. Studying the letter songs of this early era, they comment, “one need not seek profound thoughts or ornate language here...these are important only as an asset to the Mappila heritage which finds a song in everything.” (Vallikunnu, Balakrishnan, and Dr. Umar Tharamel. *Mappilappattu: PadavumPadanavum*. Kottayam: DC

On the other hand, the second wave of letter songs are those characterized as short, predominantly Malayalam, except for some Arabic, and also they do not have a public audience, but is a one to one conversation. By "second wave" I do not suppose a temporal break, but rather the letter songs predominant post-migration. Migration among Mappilas was not that which happened only after the oil boom post '73, but one would remember that there had been emigrants to Malaya, Singapore and Ceylon in reasonable (but not as widespread as the Gulf migration post 73) scale. However, one can see that those migrations did not effect a cultural form as the Gulf migration did, for reasons I would describe later. But before that, here are some snippets from the later letter songs.

(h : husband, w: wife)²

The addressing:

This is to the notice of my dearest and most loving
This letter, written as I weep,
A note written with the blood of my heart.

By the grace of the One I have received your letter
My dear, why do write so and make me cry?

(w-h)

I won't allow anyone else to eat
This sweet-filled fleshy plantain of mine
I will guard this treasure till my death
But, you should remember, I am no angel

Books, 2006.) V.M.Kutty , in his short reference to the second wave of letter songs, however, draws out its appeal thus: " Though the critics may find faults with them, letter songs reflect many scenes that ignite life and thoughts. They became the wetness of the emigrants' eyes, and the coal in their hearts. Even those whose hearts had gone numb in the deserts, unable to return, packed and came home, with tape recorder and Mappila songs." (Kutty, V.M. *MappilappattinteCharitrasancharangal*. Kozhikode: Lipi Publications.2007. p.86)

² This is not to say that these are written by men and women separately. Both the husband's and the wife's role is written by the same lyricist, and just contextually understood as husband/wife according to the male/female singer. In fact S.A.Jameel's trend setting song is contextually a wife's letter to her husband in Dubai.

(h-w)

The husband who knows not the woman's need,
Idiot he is, the creator of her sins
Chance is the mother of necessity
And who gives a chance is the leader of fools

(h-w)

What is it has been six years (since I left home)
Are things not going fine?
Is there a single month
You haven't received a letter and a D.D?

(h-w)

The man without money
What say does he have?
People say many things
But have they stopped any calamity?

(w-h)

We have become rich in people's eyes
But there is no one in our house, we are alone

(h-W)

You forgot the days of hardship...without money
You forgot the bountiful God?

The following are the obvious differences:

- 1) The letters are short.
- 2) It is addressed to a single person, and the person is the husband/wife
- 3) The issues discussed are domestic alone
- 4) Money and youth are the two topics
- 5) The author is fictional. That is, it can be any husband and any wife.

These songs are played to orchestration and all fit the 4-5 minute duration.

Before I proceed to do the social setting against which these forms acquire meaning, let me also add the importance of authorship in a letter song as it was till the second wave. The question of the author of the various letter songs is relevant not just for the problem of the real author it poses, but also that it credits the question of the conditions for the appearance of subjects in the ordering of the discourse.³ To ask the conventional question, who is

³ The question that Foucault asserts should be asked, rather than the conventional question which privileges the subject over discourse, thus enabling the "limitation of the cancerous and dangerous

the author of a letter song? When PulikkottilHyder writes the song on Mariyakutty's behalf, as long as Mariyakutty is indeed a historical person, who gets credit for the song? More importantly, is it a scission of the agent –an agent of the style, another for the content? Though in this particular example, even the ideological author function – that of the unity of style, the neutralization of contradictions, etc itself is in peril due to its tearing apart among historical characters.

The letter songs of the earlier years, produced as per request of those in whose name the song is then named, were a social activity dispersed simultaneously as it gets produced, and then put to memory of all who were present at the occasion. It was thus a song culture of mouth to mouth and for public consumption. The author, in most cases, was consequently forgotten, and so were those for whom the letters were written, but the songs survived by an effacement of the individual and the appropriation by the community. This process of the obliteration of the author, or rather the non-privileging of the subject in the discourse, but the very classifying factor of the discourse being that of the community rather than an individual is linked to the universe of images which rests on a communal mode of power, and precedes the individual and the bourgeois mode of production, the creation of the latter being dependent on the political movements as well as the migration.

The migration effect

Peter Manuel, better known for his *Cassette Culture* (1993), an extensive work on the effect of cassettes on the various indigenous song traditions of North India, has surveyed the popular music of India 1901-86. Predominantly a discussion of the style of the Hindi film music, the essay also has sections on film music of regional films as well as, as a lead up to his focus, a discussion of popular music outside the realm of cinema. What distinguishes Manuel's work is his concern for the "popular". He expresses doubt as to whether a nation as heterogeneous as India can be satisfied with the relatively homogeneous

proliferation of significations within a world where one is thrifty not only with one's resources and riches but also with one's discourse and their significations." Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?"

output of the film music industry. In other words, he indicates a level of manipulation of public taste by the music industry. Therefore, when Manuel characterises the film music as one of the many popular music traditions in India –the "one-among-many" status, he accords to film music is in itself a departure from the works we have seen above –he does it with a caveat: "Indian music is clearly popular creation to the extent that it incorporates folk elements, and the influence between folk and film music is certainly mutual" (1988:171). This caveat has to be read against his understanding of the cassette revolution in the late 1970s as "grassroots-based, decentralized, pluralistic, "democratic-participant" micro-medium" (1993:1). Manuel also notes the growing audience for Hindi film songs among foreigners, his examples being countries of South East Asia, Yugoslavia, Oman, etc. According to the study conducted by K.C. Zachariah et al.⁴ the annual remittances received by Kerala households were 2.55 times higher than what Kerala Government received from the Central Government. It was also higher than exports-earnings like sea food industries or spice industry. An underestimation of the total cash remittances received by Kerala in 1998 was Rs.35,304mn. The migration rate among Muslims was 68%. Muslims received 47%of the total remittances, Ezhavas and Syrian Christians each received about 13%, Latin Christians 11% and Nairs 9%. However, average per year per emigrant remittance for Muslim migrant was Rs.24 thousand only, compared to Latin Christian's average of Rs.33,000 and Syrian Christians Rs.27,000. This is due to the lower educational levels of the Muslim migrant. One could also then figure out why Mappila's life in the desert would have been of hardships, both of being away from home as well as being employed in unfavorable conditions due to his lower level of skills. The study also shows that migration significantly reduced the percentage of Muslim families below the poverty line.

35% of the total Muslim emigrants from the state came from the district of Malappuram, and the

⁴ Zachariah, K.C., Mathew, E.T. and Rajan, S. Irudaya. "Socio-economic and Demographic Consequences of Migration in Kerala". Working Paper 303.CDS. May 2000

district sent out the largest number of migrants too (6,295 mn). The district of Malappuram, with a majority of the Muslim population, received 17% of the total remittances. The study shows that emigration from Kerala is mainly a male affair. Migration increased the number of single-member households by 33%, 2 member households by 43% and 3 member households by 25%. As a result, the female headed households were 25%. While nearly 50% of the emigrants were Muslims, less than 5% of the Muslim emigrants were females and the husbands of about 24% of married women in Malappuram live outside India. In the case of about 2.4% of the gulf wives (about 24 thousand women), their husbands had left for Gulf within days after marriage; almost a third left within three months of marriage, and about 45% left during the first year of marriage. One can read the contents, and the tone of the letter songs against these data.

It's telling effects, as we found out from the data are two: a breakdown of the family system, and the high rate of consumption. of migration on the letter songs, which, when juxtaposed with the data, is speaking for itself. However, to add to these points are the increased prominence of individual consumption of cultural goods made possible at this time first by the arrival of tape recorders, which coincided with the second wave of letter songs, and later that of the TV (In 1998, 54% of the emigrant households had a television set each.), which is then to be juxtaposed with the current form of Mappila albums in Malabar, which can make for another interesting study. The tape recorders made the appropriation of the songs possible in a very domestic setting, and this along with the emergence of nuclear households meant that the song was now an object of personal consumption as never before. Gulf remittances made mobility in the social scale a possibility, with the gulf remittances mostly spent on consuming, which would then be the entry point of the Mappila into the material order of a higher social class. This period does not just witness the middle classisation of the Mappila but of the Kerala society as a whole, its material practice being that of conspicuous consumption. In the study by CDS, 86% of the households mentioned living expenses as the main expenditure item met out of remittances. The consumption rate of Kerala, which was .2% less

than the Indian average (.47 against .67) in 73, rose 41% above the national average by 1998. The obsession with money and gold, found in the second wave of the letter songs has then to be understood against this possibility as well strife towards the symbolic power it offered.

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