

Garland Encyclopedia of World Music

Muslim Music

MUSLIM MUSIC

The Muslims of Kerala, known as Mappila(s), have an identity of their own apart from the other Muslim communities in India. Mappilas are the descendants of Arab settlers and Hindu converts to Islam. The Arabs established trade relationship with Kerala much before the time of the Prophet. Circumstantial evidences point to the presence of Islam in Kerala before the end of the seventh century. Mappilas are spread all over Kerala. The highest concentration, however, is in the northern districts of Kozhikode, Kannur, and Malappuram.

The musical tradition of the Mappilas, in general, is called mappilappattu (Mappila songs). The tradition is at least seven centuries old and is a perfect blend of Kerala and Arab musical styles. The language of Mappila songs is called Arabi-malayalam which, while following Malayalam syntax, mixes Malayalam words with Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Tamil, and Kannada words. Some times a single couplet may contain words from four or five languages. The only exception to this is a genre called "arabi-baith" that is composed exclusively in Arabic. Arabi-malayalam is written in Arabic script supplemented with signs for phonemes that are specific to Malayalam. Traditional singers of Mappila songs have a peculiar voice fluctuation that serves the vocalization of Arabic syllables. This kind of voice fluctuation makes it different from the vocal styles of other musical traditions of Kerala.

A wide variety of themes are found in Mappila songs. Most popular

among them are praises of the Prophet and Muslim saints, descriptions of holy wars, love and romance of legendary heroes as well as of ordinary people of the region where the song is composed. It has been recently discovered that even stories from the Hindu epic Ramayana were subject matter for Mappila songs.

A distinctive mark of Mappila songs is their metric structure, called isal (from the Tamil word for music, icai). It is based on a combination of Arabic and Dravidian systems of prosody and is composed of variations of quantity-based, long-short patterns. Popular isals are used as formulae and are quoted by the initial words of famous song texts in those isals. There are more than a hundred isals that are popular. A composer may combine two or more isals to create a new one. Therefore, the act of composing a song is called pattukettuka (to tie a song), the analogy being that of tying a garland with different flowers. The tying of song is governed by norms regarding rhyme, rhythm, and tempo. Slow tempo is called chayal (slanting), and fast tempo, murukkam (tightening).

Music and dance are integral parts of festive occasions among the Mappilas. Oppana is the most popular among dances. It is performed by women and men (separately) in groups of eight, ten, or twelve on festive occasions such as wedding and celebration of the first menstruation of a girl. In women's oppana during wedding, performers adorn themselves with colorful costumes and jewelry and dance around the bedecked bride seated in the center (see figure). Songs describing the beauty of the bride and her expectations of conjugal bliss are accompanied by intricate steps and clapping of hands. The lead singer sings each line of the song that is repeated by the group in

call-response style. The performance begins in slow tempo and progresses with a variety of rhythms (7/8, 4/4, 6/8, etc.) and tempi. Men's oppana is not accompanied by dance movements. The performers sit on the floor or stand stationary with the groom in the center and sing and clap hands. When the groom goes to the bridal chamber, the singers accompany him to the door.

Kolkkali (dance with sticks) is performed by men in groups of eighteen or twenty. The dancers hold one-foot long stick in each hand and move in circles while rhythmically striking the sticks of the dancers on the left and right. The leader of the group, known as gurukkal (teacher), controls each stage of the dance which starts in slow tempo and builds up speed gradually. He sings each line of the song, and the group repeats them. The songs are devotional in nature. Complex rhythmic executions and fast pirouetting body movements that require training in martial arts make this dance visually spectacular.

Daffmuttu (striking of daff) is popular among certain sections of Mappilas. Daff, an Arab percussion instrument, is played in accompaniment to devotional songs during religious ceremonies. It is performed by men in groups. Performers sit or stand holding daff in the left hand. They bend their bodies to the four sides while striking daff with the right hand. Singing is done in a loud voice. Daffmuttu may be performed during Kuthuratheeb (recital accompanied by piercing). While the group recites religious verses, one or two men pierce their bodies with knives or lances.

Paricamuttukali (dance with striking shields), which requires training in martial arts, is performed by twelve men as part of wedding

celebrations. Dancers strike their shields, while moving in circles. There are special songs known as paricappattu (shield songs) for this dance which is now seldom performed.

There are a few musical genres that are not accompanied by dance. Katthupattu (letter-song) is the most popular among them. It is in the form of a letter sung by a young woman whose husband works abroad. Love, pain of separation, longing for reunion, and even detailed description of personal life may appear as themes in these songs. Letter-songs are performed with instrumental accompaniment.

Some of the performing arts of the Mappilas are the results of shared traditions with other religious communities. The oppana of women is very similar to kaikottikkali (dance with handclapping) performed by Hindu women during the festive season of Onam in the month of September. The Jews, Christians, and Mappilas of Kerala have their own mailanchippattu, songs for applying henna on the palms and feet of the bride on the night before the wedding. Kolkkali of the Mappilas share a similar vocabulary of body movements with the Kolkkali performed by the Hindus. Paricamuttukali is performed by Mappilas and Christians with slight variations and is an adaptation of kalari (training in martial arts) tradition established by the Hindu warrior community.

The performance context of Mappila songs have expanded over the years from home and public places of worship to performance halls, political party conventions, and school and college youth festivals. Even non-Mappilas compose songs for such occasions and performers, too, come from different religious backgrounds. Change in performance context has influenced the choice of musical instruments for

accompaniment. Besides conventional instruments such as daff, aravana (similar to, but larger than daff), and mappilashehnai (similar to North Indian shehnai), synthesizers, electric guitars, and rhythm boxes have found place in contemporary performances for chordal and rhythmic accompaniment.

Mappila songs are broadcast over the state owned radio and television stations. The most popular means of transmission, however, is pre-recorded cassettes. About a hundred pre-recorded cassettes of Mappila songs are released every year.

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