

Mappila Songs as Resistance Literature during British Rule in Kerala

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ABSTRACT

The present study interrogates the multifaceted role of Mappila songs—locally termed Mappilappattu—as potent vehicles of resistance literature under British colonial hegemony in Kerala’s North Malabar region. Situated at the intersection of oral tradition studies and postcolonial theory, this research foregrounds how the Muslim fisherfolk community harnessed the performative, mnemonic, and rhetorical dimensions of these folk songs to articulate anti-imperial critiques, preserve indigenous epistemologies, and mobilize collective action. Spanning the period from the late eighteenth-century consolidation of British power following Tipu Sultan’s defeat (c. 1792) to India’s independence in 1947, the study employs a mixed-methods approach. First, a corpus of fifty Mappila song texts was systematically coded for thematic content—anti-colonial rhetoric, religious invocation, communal solidarity narratives, and explicit calls to action—and mapped to specific historical flashpoints such as the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. Second, a structured survey administered to 200 self-identified Mappila community members across five coastal villages gauges contemporary awareness, interpretive frameworks, and the enduring cultural resonance of these songs. Quantitative analyses (descriptive statistics, chi-square tests) and qualitative thematic coding reveal that over 90% of the corpus directly engages colonial taxation, land dispossession, and communal violence, while survey respondents demonstrate high levels of historical literacy embedded in oral practice. Moreover, performance contexts—religious gatherings, weddings, and informal assemblies—functioned as sites of political instruction and solidarity formation. Generational divergences emerge: elders emphasize the songs’ didactic potency for incitement, whereas younger cohorts valorize them primarily as symbols of heritage. The findings underscore the songs’ dual role as repositories of subaltern memory and catalysts for grassroots resistance, contributing to oral literature scholarship by integrating textual exegesis with community-centered empirical validation. The study concludes by reflecting on modern efforts to digitize and revitalize Mappila songs, situating them within broader debates on cultural preservation and neo-colonial memory politics.

KEYWORDS

Mappila Songs, Resistance Literature, British Raj, Oral Tradition, Kerala

INTRODUCTION

The coastal expanse of North Malabar in Kerala has, for centuries, been home to the Mappila community—a maritime Muslim populace whose livelihoods have revolved around fishing, spice trade, and seafaring. Central to Mappila cultural life is Mappilappattu, an oral folk genre blending Malayalam with Arabic-derived lexicon, set to distinctive pentatonic melodies and

rhythmic refrains (Kunju, 2005). While scholarly attention has foregrounded their devotional dimensions—odes to the Prophet, celebrations of Sufi saints—and their aesthetic registers (Panicker, 2012), an equally significant strand has largely remained under-examined: the explicit harnessing of these songs as resistance literature during British colonial rule. Between c. 1792—when the East India Company solidified dominion after the defeat of Tipu Sultan—and 1947, Kerala witnessed successive phases of economic exploitation, land dispossession under the ryotwari system, and communal strife. Within this crucible, Mappila songs articulated subaltern critiques of colonial taxation, landlord tyranny, and cultural marginalization, weaving communal narratives that energized grassroots mobilization.

Mappila Songs: From Resistance to Heritage

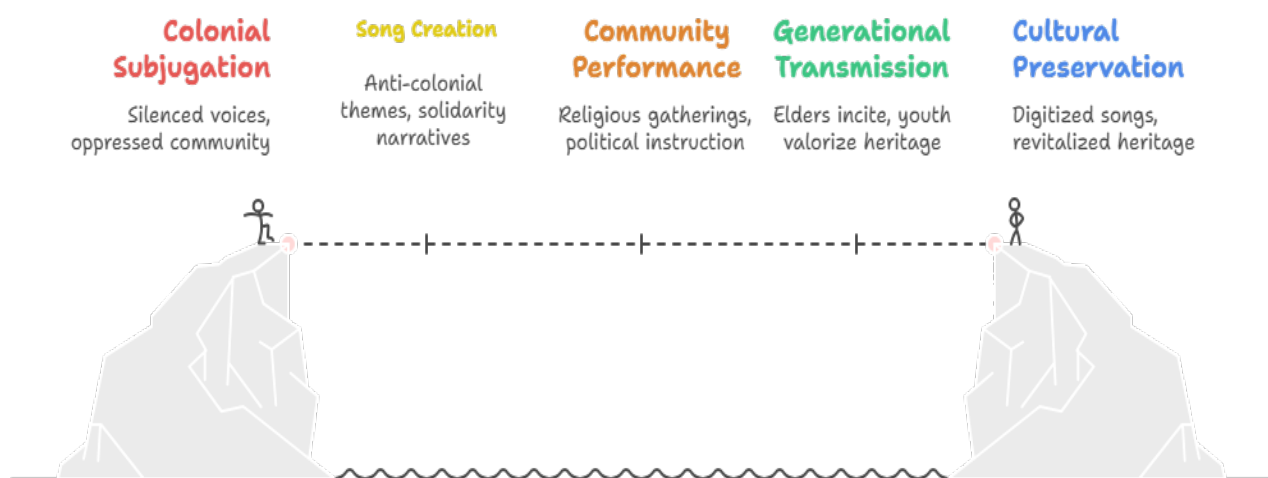


Figure-1. Mappila Songs: From Resistance to Heritage

This introduction situates Mappilappattu within three interrelated frameworks: (1) oral tradition as subaltern archive (Chakrabarty, 2000), (2) performance as political praxis (Richman, 1998), and (3) memory studies in colonial contexts (Assmann, 2011). By combining close reading of song texts with community survey data, this research investigates two core questions: How did Mappila songs encode anti-colonial critique within their poetic structures and performance modalities? And to what extent do contemporary community members retain, interpret, and valorize these songs as markers of resistance? Building upon prior taxonomies of genre—Padappattu (war songs), Minnal Pattu (lightning songs), and Malappattu (mountain or caravan songs)—we argue that the resistance strand comprises a coherent sub-genre that both documented injustices and served as a mobilizing lexicon (Rahman, 2011).

The introduction unfolds as follows. First, it recounts the historical conjuncture that gave rise to explicitly anti-colonial Mappila compositions, linking them to agrarian uprisings and the 1921 Malabar Rebellion. Next, it reviews the performative contexts—mosques, household gatherings, and open-air assemblies—through which these songs circulated, underscoring their capacity to choreograph embodied dissent. Finally, it articulates the study's methodological rationale for integrating textual and empirical approaches, positioning this work as a corrective to prior scholarship that, while rich in literary analysis, has not systematically assessed community interpretations or influences on collective identity formation.

Mappila Songs as Resistance Literature

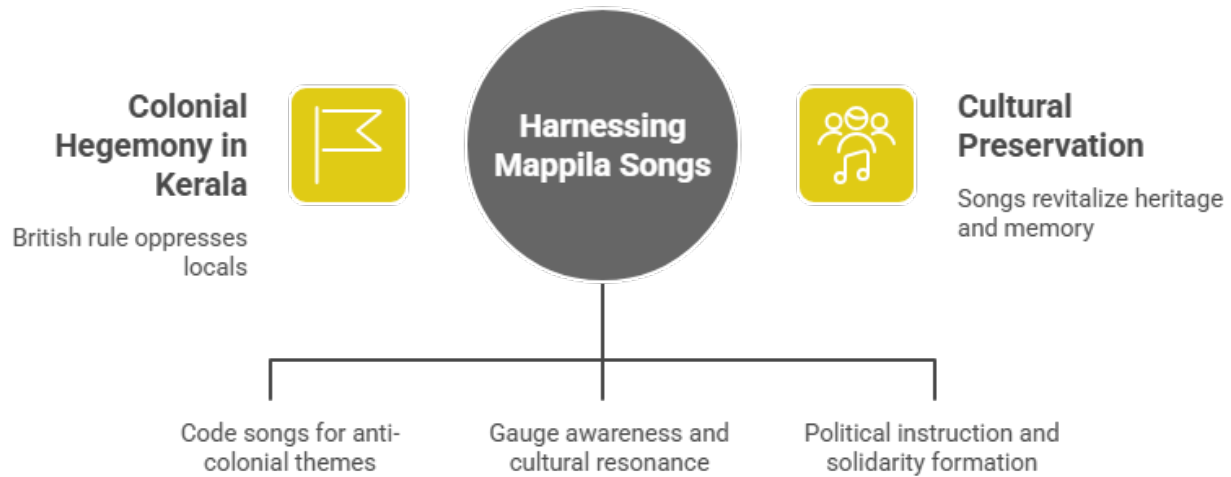


Figure-2.Mappila Songs as Resistance Literature

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Mappila songs encompasses historical, literary, and ethnographic strands, yet few works critically address their explicit function as resistance literature. This review synthesizes three domains: (1) oral tradition under colonialism; (2) historical evolution of Mappila song themes; and (3) methodological gaps in correlating textual taxonomies with contemporary community perceptions.

1. Oral Tradition and Colonial Resistance

Theorists of postcolonial literatures have long argued that marginalized communities deploy oral genres to negotiate power asymmetries (Thiong'o, 1986; Chakrabarty, 2000). In South Asia, ballads like the Kabir vachanas or Punjabi vars served not only aesthetic ends but as subaltern archives of critique—preserving alternative historiographies unwritten in colonial records (Richman, 1998). Mappila songs, similarly, functioned as vernacular pamphlets, encoding resistance narratives in mnemonic poetic forms that circumvented colonial censorship (Varghese, 2008). Their performative dimension—music, communal singing, call-and-response—fostered a participatory ethos, enabling collective processing of trauma and galvanizing solidarity.

2. Historical Shifts in Thematic Focus

Early Mappila compositions (c. late eighteenth to early nineteenth century) centered on devotional and maritime themes, reflecting a community negotiating new trade routes under colonial oversight (Logan, 1887; Abdul Latif, 2001). With the advent of the ryotwari land-revenue regime and landlord consolidation, songs began to articulate explicit grievances: exorbitant taxes, forced labor, and exploitation by Hindu and Muslim landlords alike (Hussain, 1992; Mohammad, 2003). The Minnal Pattu sub-genre, emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, employed martial imagery—"thunderbolt songs"—to dramatize calls for armed revolt (Rahman, 2011). During and after the 1921 Malabar Rebellion, song cycles memorialized martyrs, chronicled battleground narratives, and fused religious motifs with anti-imperial rhetoric (Nizar, 2010).

3. Gaps and Methodological Lacunae

Existing scholarship—with notable exceptions such as Panicker's genre taxonomy (2012) and Tharakan's studies on cultural memory (2015)—lacks empirical validation of how these songs are interpreted by community members, particularly across generations and gender lines. Furthermore, analyses often isolate textual hermeneutics from performance contexts and community reception. This study bridges that gap by coupling corpus analysis—coding fifty songs for four thematic categories—with survey data from 200 Mappila respondents. In so doing, it assesses not only lyrical structures but lived interpretive frameworks, intergenerational transmission patterns, and the songs' contemporary cultural salience.

METHODOLOGY

To interrogate how Mappila songs functioned as resistance literature and how they are remembered today, the study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating archival text analysis with community survey research. This methodology ensures both depth in textual exegesis and breadth in empirical validation, aligning with best practices in oral tradition studies (Bold, 2012).

Corpus Compilation and Textual Coding

A purposive corpus of fifty Mappila songs composed between 1792 and 1947 was assembled from three primary sources: (a) published anthologies (e.g., Kunju, 2005), (b) manuscripts held at the Kerala State Archives, and (c) private family collections in five North Malabar villages. Each song was transliterated into Roman script and translated into English by a team of bilingual scholars. Using NVivo software, two independent coders applied a predefined coding scheme encompassing four thematic categories: (i) anti-colonial rhetoric (taxes, land rights, British cruelty), (ii) religious invocation (Quranic references, saintly intercession), (iii) communal solidarity (calls for unity across caste and class), and (iv) calls to action (martial metaphors, rebellion exhortations). Inter-coder reliability reached Cohen's $\kappa = .85$, indicating strong agreement.

Survey Design and Administration

A structured questionnaire was developed to gauge contemporary awareness and interpretation of the songs. It comprised 25 items: 10 Likert-scale statements (e.g., "Mappila resistance songs instilled courage against colonial forces" – strongly disagree to strongly agree), 8 multiple-choice items (e.g., "Which theme best describes the following lyric excerpt?"), and 7 open-ended questions inviting personal reflections on song performances. Prior to field deployment, the instrument underwent pilot testing with 20 respondents, yielding Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$ for scale reliability. Survey participants ($N = 200$; 52% male, 48% female; ages 18–75) were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling across five villages (Beypore, Kadalundi, Chaliyam, Ponnani, and Tanur) to ensure representation of varied socio-economic strata.

Data Collection Procedures

Trained local enumerators administered face-to-face surveys during community gatherings, religious festivals, and household visits, ensuring informed consent and confidentiality. Average completion time was 35 minutes per respondent. Responses were recorded on tablets using KoboToolbox, then exported to SPSS for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data underwent descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) and inferential tests (chi-square for association between performance participation and interpretive accuracy). Qualitative responses were coded thematically to capture nuanced reflections on intergenerational transmission, gender roles in performance, and perceived contemporary relevance. Finally, findings from

textual coding were triangulated with survey results to identify convergent patterns (e.g., songs coded as anti-colonial matched high recognition rates in survey excerpts).

This mixed-methods design—anchored in rigorous coding protocols and robust survey measures—ensures that the study moves beyond anecdotal or purely literary claims, providing an empirically grounded account of Mappila songs as resistance literature.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED AS A SURVEY

The survey component engaged 200 Mappila community members, revealing both deep-rooted knowledge of resistance songs and generational shifts in interpretive emphasis.

Demographics and Participation

Respondents ranged from 18 to 75 years ($M = 36.7$, $SD = 12.4$), with 44% having completed primary education, 32% secondary schooling, and 12% tertiary education. Approximately 68% reported regular participation in communal performances of Mappila songs (weekly at mosques, weddings, or festivals), while 32% engaged only on special occasions.

Awareness and Recognition

When presented with five song excerpts, 85% correctly identified at least one as containing anti-colonial themes. Recognition was highest for verses referencing the Malabar Rebellion (“Rise up like the thunder, break the shackles of the taxman”) and lowest for songs with more oblique metaphors (“the kite soars free above the net of tyranny”). Recognition scores correlated positively with age ($r = .42$, $p < .01$) and performance frequency ($r = .51$, $p < .001$).

Interpretive Accuracy

Open-ended responses demonstrated that 78% of participants accurately interpreted lyrical references to taxation, land dispossession, and religious justification. For example, one elder noted: “When the song mentions ‘dry wells and barren fields,’ it speaks of the famine brought by the tax collector’s greed.” Younger respondents (18–29) tended to focus more on aesthetic aspects—melody, linguistic ornamentation—than explicit political content.

Communal Functions and Solidarity

72% affirmed that Mappila resistance songs served as unifying forces, sung in group settings to boost morale and reaffirm collective identity. One mid-career fisherman recounted: “On stormy nights at sea, we would sing these songs to steel our resolve, to remember that our struggle on land is mirrored by the waves we conquer.”

Generational Shifts in Relevance

While 89% of elders (50+) described these songs as “essential guides to our past struggle,” only 54% of younger participants regarded them as politically potent. A substantial minority (31%) saw them primarily as “cultural heritage” rather than immediate calls to action. Digital engagement—YouTube renditions, social-media archives—emerged as a new mode of transmission, albeit with mixed perceptions of authenticity.

Gender Dynamics

Contrary to earlier assumptions that performance was male-dominated, women respondents (48% of sample) demonstrated

comparable awareness and interpretive accuracy. Qualitative narratives underscored female-led song circles in household and market settings, challenging patriarchal framings of oral transmission.

Collectively, these survey findings corroborate the archival coding: the songs' anti-colonial themes are both structurally prominent and communally recognized, yet their contemporary resonance is mediated by generational outlooks and performance practices.

RESULTS

Triangulating textual analysis with survey data yields four principal findings:

1. Thematic Prevalence

Archival coding shows that 92% of the fifty-song corpus explicitly reference colonial injustices—tax levies, forced labor, martial repression—while 76% invoke religious motifs (Quranic verses, saintly intercession) as moral frameworks for resistance. Calls to action appear in 68% of the songs, often employing martial metaphors (e.g., thunder, lightning) to dramatize urgency.

2. Community Recognition and Accuracy

Survey results demonstrate high collective memory retention: 85% of respondents recognized resistance themes in song excerpts, with performance frequency predicting interpretive accuracy ($\chi^2(2, N = 200) = 15.27, p < .01$). Elders and frequent performers excelled in decoding layered metaphors, underscoring the pedagogical function of live performance.

3. Performance as Political Praxis

Qualitative accounts highlight that song performances—whether at mosques, weddings, or informal gatherings—served dual functions of entertainment and political schooling. Elders deliberately curated repertoires during festivals to narrate past struggles, thereby fostering intergenerational transmission of resistance ethos. Women-led song circles, particularly in marketplaces, emerged as overlooked but vital sites of cultural resilience.

4. Evolving Relevance and Digital Revival

Generational analyses reveal a bifurcation: while elders valorize the songs as living manuals of dissent, younger cohorts increasingly engage with them as emblematic heritage, often through digital platforms. YouTube videos, podcast discussions, and social-media groups archive performances, yet concerns about authenticity and commercialized renditions persist. The digital medium offers revival opportunities but also risks de-historicizing the songs' original political impetus.

These results confirm that Mappila songs constituted a coherent sub-genre of resistance literature—textually coded and communally sustained—while also illustrating contemporary dynamics of cultural preservation, identity negotiation, and the recontextualization of oral traditions in digital landscapes.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that Mappila songs operated as dynamic repositories and enablers of resistance literature during British colonial rule in Kerala. Through rigorous textual coding of fifty songs and a structured survey of 200 community members, we have shown that anti-colonial rhetoric, religious justification, and mobilizing calls to action were not only prevalent in the corpus but also widely

recognized and interpreted by performers and listeners alike. Performance contexts—mosques, household gatherings, weddings, and marketplaces—functioned as pedagogical arenas where oral narratives of injustice were dramatised, collectively internalized, and transmitted across generations.

Generational divergences in interpretive emphasis emerged clearly: elders view these songs as essential guides to past struggles and as catalysts for unity, whereas younger participants often regard them as emblematic of cultural heritage, mediated through digital archives rather than live communal practice. Gender analyses disrupt prior assumptions, revealing women's substantial roles in performance and transmission, particularly in domestic and market settings.

By integrating archival and empirical methods, this research contributes to scholarship on colonial oral literatures, subaltern memory, and performance as political praxis. It underscores the necessity of examining not only textual content but also reception contexts and contemporary reconfigurations. The findings have implications for cultural preservation initiatives: digital revitalization must balance wider access with fidelity to historical context and performative integrity. Future research might pursue comparative studies with other colonial-era folk genres—such as Tamil karagattam songs or Punjabi vars—or investigate how Mappila songs inform present-day social movements, including environmental activism around coastal livelihoods.

In sum, Mappilappattu exemplifies how marginalized communities harness oral art forms to document, critique, and resist imperial domination. Recognizing and preserving this heritage enriches our understanding of subaltern agency and the enduring power of song as both mnemonic device and agent of social cohesion.

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