



The Impact Of Arabic Culture On The Theatrical Practices Of Muslims In Eastern Sri Lanka: Special Reference To The KPW And KPC DS Divisions Of The Batticaloa District

¹Dr. HLM. Mohideen, ²Dr. Mohideen Abdul Kadir K.J.

¹Geust Lecturer, ²Assistant Professor

¹Islahiya Arabic College (Approved Institute of Bharathidasan University), Tiruchirappalli - 620 007.

²School of Arabic & Islamic studies, B.S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science & Technology, Chennai- 48.

Abstract: A strong connection with a language often leads to an attraction to that language and an interest in its associated culture. For Muslims worldwide, the Arabic language holds significant importance as it is the medium of Islamic basic sources, creating a profound relationship with Arabic irrespective of their geographical location or native language. This relationship extends to various artistic, cultural, literary, and theatrical expressions. Sri Lankan Muslims are no exception to this influence. Despite prevalent misconceptions attributing this influence to patriarchal factors, this study investigates the impact of Arabic culture and language on the theatrical activities of the Muslim community in the KPW and KPC DS Divisions of the Batticaloa District, Eastern Sri Lanka. The research aims to explain the connection between Sri Lankan Muslims and the Arabic language, introduce Sri Lankan Muslim theatre, and explore the cultural influences of Arabic culture on Muslim theatrical practices. The study reveals that among the Sri Lankan Muslims, particularly those in the KPW and KPC Divisions of the Batticaloa District, various theatrical practices such as drama, Kooththu, dance, Villu Paattu, Kolattam, Pakkeer Baith, Gaseetha songs, and Kuravai have developed with distinct characteristics influenced by Arabic culture and language. These practices frequently incorporate vernacular expressions. The study recommends the revitalization of such theatrical activities in a manner that preserves the original Islamic concepts and religious ideologies, ensuring their continuation as a practical cultural expression.

Keywords - Arabic Language, Arabic Culture, Theatrical Practices, Sri Lankan Muslims, Batticaloa District.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is the medium through which a society thinks and communicates. "Many aspects of a society's development and civilization are influenced by the character and use of its language, which is a crucial part of that society. Language serves as an agent in satisfying the various emotional needs of individuals. As an agent, it is the point of origin, interaction, and transformation within a society. In this way, language contributes to the artistic, cultural, political, and economic development of the society in which people live, beginning with their basic needs." (Samad, 2018)

Among Muslims, Arabic holds a unique position among the world's languages. This is because both the Qur'an and the Prophet's words are in Arabic. Arabic is distinguished as the language of one of the world's major religions. It is recognized as the language of Islam and Muslims. Familiarity with this traditional language has a clear and powerful influence on knowledge, culture, and religion, much like it did for the early generations of the Muslim community, including the companions of the Prophet and their followers. Emulating these righteous ancestors enhances one's knowledge, religious understanding, and cultural awareness because

the essence of the Arabic language is deeply intertwined with Islam. Since understanding the Qur'an and Sunnah is obligatory, it is therefore considerable that learning Arabic is also obligatory. (Mohideen, 2019, p.10)

The Arabic language has strongly contributed to the formation of Arab Islamic culture. For example, it has played a crucial role in advancing Islamic culture while maintaining a focus on the past. This emphasis on the past is why traditional Islamic culture became oriented towards historical continuity. Arabs use Arabic to communicate, making the language influential among them. Additionally, Muslims are captivated by the Arabic language because Islam is expressed through it. (Ajami, 2016, p.120)

The relationship between Sri Lankan Muslims and the Arabic language has an ancient and deep historical roots. "Muslims of Sri Lanka, during this period, seem to have had a very strong cultural link with Baghdad, the capital of the Abbaside Empire. There is a tradition to the effect that the Abbaside Caliph of Baghdad had sent a religious teacher named Khalid Bin Abu Bakaya to Sri Lanka about 300 A.H./940 A.D. in response to a request by Sri Lankan Muslims for a religious teacher. He is stated to have died in Sri Lanka in 317 A.H./929 A.D., and the Caliph had sent a stone inserted in Arabic giving particulars about this teacher and it was placed in the grave of the Muslim community in Colombo. The cemetery having been abandoned the stone had been taken away by an official and placed at the entrance to his house as a stepping stone." (Shukri, 1986, pp: 340-341) According to this, "It is evident that the desire to learn Islam and the Arabic language has existed among the Muslims of Sri Lanka since the early days of Islam, with even the caliphs of that time providing full support to this endeavor." (Jalaldeen, 2017, p. 119)

This had a significant impact on the cultural and linguistic practices of Sri Lankan Muslims. It also contributed to the emergence of the 'Arabu-Tamil' dialect, where Tamil, the native language, is written using Arabic script. This dialect arose due to the influence of Islam, whose primary sources are in Arabic. As Islam spread from Arabia to non-Arabic-speaking regions, Arabic left a lasting sign on the local languages. Given that Arabic is the language of the Qur'an, Hadith, and Fiqh laws, it applied a profound influence on the people who adopted Islam (Ameen, 2000, p. 216).

It also influenced the literary forms among Muslims, leading to the emergence of numerous literary works connected to Arabic culture. Notably, the novel Asanbey Sarithiram by the scholar Siddi Lebbe, considered the first novel in Sri Lanka, tells the story of an Egyptian prince. Published in 1885, Asanbey Sarithiram is recognized as the first Sri Lankan novel, though it was published in Chennai and authored by a Sri Lankan writer. The author appears to highlight the pride of Islamic culture through the life events of Asanbey, the son of the King of Egypt. (Maunaguru, Chitralka & Numan, 1978, p: 37)

"Similar to other communities, Sri Lankan Muslims have developed a distinctive form of theatre. It is not surprising that Muslims have been overlooked in historical records related to theatre. It is known that the Abbas play and Alibatusha play were performed among the Muslim communities in the Ampara region. However, Tamil scholars in positions of power did not document the Koothu arts performed by Muslim people who were not part of the power structure." (Maunaguru, 2003, p. 209) Koothu or Therukoothu (Tamil: கூத்து), is an ancient art, where artists play songs with dance and music in storytelling the epics, performed in Tamil. However, the Muslims were able to build a unique theatre. It is a unique feature of Islamic heritage and Arab cultural background. This stage was influenced by Arabic culture and language.

The theatre of Sri Lankan Muslims encompassed various aspects, including different types of theatrical elements such as shadow art (நிழலாட்டக்கலை), Padam Paaduthal (பதம் பாடுதல்), calling the groom (மாப்பிள்ளை அழைப்பு), and ballad singing (கதைப்பாடல்). These traditions have been prevalent among Sri Lankan Muslims. Particularly when discussing the arts of the Eastern Province Muslims, who possess unique characteristics shaped by their geography and socio-cultural background in Sri Lanka, it is crucial to highlight the traditions of performing arts and their involvement in them (Anas, 2016, p. 88). In particular, drama, Villu Paattu, Kolattam, Pakkeer Baith, and Kuravai became increasingly common among the Muslims.

II. RESEARCH PROBLEM

There are numerous issues concerning Sri Lankan Muslim theatre. Notably, no one has yet conducted a separate, systematic study of the traditional theatres in Sri Lanka. At least, there is no comprehensive book on the subject. Some individuals have shared their views through articles and radio talks. Among the notable contributors are Dr. A.N. Perumal and Professor Sayapu Maraikkar. S.M. Kamaldeen, S.H.M. Jameel, Thajudeen, and Professor Anas are from Sri Lanka. (Idrees, 2012, p. 13) An important issue has emerged within Muslim theatre activities, particularly due to the significant influence of the Arabic language and culture. In the context of the New World Order, with the rise of Arabization and Arab nationalism, the prominent presence of Arabic language and cultural background in the religious, educational, artistic, and cultural spheres of Sri Lankan Muslims has raised various concerns within the political and social environment of Sri Lanka. This situation has led to the spread of misinformation and false propaganda about Muslims.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study is formulated with the following objectives:

1. To explore the relationship between Sri Lankan Muslims and the Arabic language
2. To introduce the Sri Lankan Muslim theatre
3. To examine the influence of Arabic culture on theatrical practices among Muslims in the KPW and KPC divisions of Batticaloa district, East Sri Lanka.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Muslims of KPW and KPC divisions

Most Muslims in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province reside in the Koralaiattu West (KPW) and Koralaiattu Central (KPC) DS Divisions of the Batticaloa District. When exploring the native history of Muslims in this region, although precise records of their initial settlement are lacking, various documents and historical notes suggest they have lived here for a long time. According to Pandit V.C. Kandiah's book *Mattakkalappu Tamilagam* (Batticaloa Tamilnadu), during the Mukkuvar-Timilars conflict, a thousand-Muslim army allied with the Mukkuvars, driving the Timilars away from the banks of the Verugal River. This event took place after the 5th century AD, and it is noted that the Muslim forces established a boundary by placing a stone pillar, which today marks the location known as 'Dhunadi' in Panichchankerni. Some of these soldiers later settled in 'Paalvalavu' within the Kalkudah area. One of them married a woman from the Mukkuvar community and settled in 'Pallimadu.' Historical records of Batticaloa indicate that the Mukkuvars, grateful for the Muslim army's assistance in defeating the Timilars, gave their women in marriage to the Muslim soldiers known as 'Patania,' who then permanently settled in these areas (Junaideen, 2009, pp. 11-12).

4.2 Muslims of KPW and KPC divisions and their art and literary activities

Muslims in the KPW and KPC divisions have a rich history spanning centuries. They exhibit a deep respect not only for religious practices but also for cultural traditions. Over the years, various staged activities have been noted among the Muslims of these divisions. These activities have been recognized as both cultural events and religious rituals. Muslims in the KPW and KPC divisions are actively engaged in religious pursuits, as reflected by the presence of educational institutions and organizations dedicated to religious education. Simultaneously, the region is a showcase of artistic and cultural activities, demonstrating a strong appreciation for the arts. The area is home to a variety of literary figures, including poets, novelists, short story writers, dramatists, singers, short film makers, and Bhawas. It is a region known for its rich contribution to media activities.

4.3 Theatrical Practices of Muslims of KPW and KPC Divisions

Among the Muslims in the KPW and KPC divisions, there are various theatre activities such as drama, Koothu, and dancing. Notable stage activities include Drama, Villu Paatu, Kolattam, Pakkeer Baith, and Kuravai. Additionally, religious songs known as 'Qaseeda' are performed at events in the KPW and KPC divisions. These songs can be solo or group performances. Group songs often feature children and are accompanied by dance. Performances are staged only after several days of training, with costumes and make-up. Such events are particularly common in schools and pre-schools. It was observed that all these activities are in some way related to the Arabic language and its cultural aspects. Occasionally, there are opportunities to engage entirely in Arabic. This connection is particularly evident in the literary and theatrical aspects of the community. One reason for this is the use of the local language by the people. Although the current generation has moved away from the local dialect, the older generation still hears traditional words from the region. Among these, you can find Arabic, Sinhala, English, loanwords etc. However, as they are not pronounced according to the correct grammatical structure, they can be classified as regional dialect words. These local dialect words reflect the long-term existence of our society and the uniqueness of its culture and civilization, representing its relationship with other societies (Nafeer, 2006, p. 35). The religious and culturally influenced theatre practices of Muslims in KPW and KPC Divisions can be described as follows:

4.3.1 Drama

In this region, plays often focus on religious concepts or Arab historical events. A notable example of this is the drama *Punitha Poomiile* (Holy Land), directed by U. Ahmed and H.M.M. Ismail, focuses on the Palestinian Arab issue. The story, originally written by the renowned writer and educationist the late Y. Ahmad, later gained popularity as a stage production. Prof. M.S.M. Anas (2003) states: "The play *Punitha Poomiile* was staged in 2002 at OBE Perera Hall as a special Islamic Day program organized by the

Peradaniya University Muslim Majlis. It received prevalent acclaim from students, lecturers, and the general public present that day. The play, which is reported to have won first place at the Tamil Day Festival, was subsequently presented as a special program at the International Islamic Tamil Literature Conference held at the Colombo Bandaranaike International Conference Hall. It was praised not only by Sri Lankans but also by literary figures from Tamil Nadu, Malaysia, and Singapore. The brief, forty-minute performance was met with silent and tearful appreciation, marking the emergence of a new trend in Muslim dramas. Created by BT/BC/Valaichchenai Annoor National School in the Eastern Province, the drama began as a modest effort by ordinary school students but demonstrated the essence of Muslim drama. It introduced new techniques and styles, representing a fresh beginning for Muslim theatre. Modern theatre techniques, music, song, dramatization of events, and innovative stage use were progressive features of this drama. From its origins as a school play, it signifies a remarkable development. U. Ahmed and H.M.M. Ismail, who moved away from traditional methods to employ modern techniques in an emotionally impactful manner, deserve commendation. This drama serves as a model for the form that Muslim drama should take, emphasizing discussion of issues and providing guidance." (Anas, 2003, p. 179).

In addition, a play titled *Barlamanush Shaidaan* (Parliament of Satans) was staged at BT/BC/Valaichchenai Annoor National School, influenced by Arabic literature. Local dialect is also used in social dramas with regional themes. It is noteworthy that this vernacular language frequently incorporates many Arabic words.

4.3.2 Annaviyar Songs

"Numerous poets and Annavis have resided here in the post-independence era. Notable figures include Mahmood Alim, who was skilled in composing poetry in both Arabic and Tamil; Lebbai Thambi Alim, known for his religious teaching poems titled 'Anagaram Maalai'; Abdul Samad Alim; Asanar Pulavar; Agappai Pulavar; Uduman Pulavar; Ibra Lebbai Pulavar; and Sinnavan Annaviyar. Additionally, women poets such as Mursalam and Masdaar Manisi have also contributed to the literary heritage of this place." (Peer Mohamed, 2002, p. 11) These Annaviyar songs were primarily sung during Kolattam performances and occasionally featured in religious festivals. A notable example is the Naattaar songs by Mustafa Annaviyar. In one of his essays for the Sahitya Festival Special issue "Marudhonri," published by the Cultural Forum of the KPW Oddamavadi division, short story writer S.L.M. Haneefa (2002) discusses the literary contributions of Muslims from the KPW and KPC divisions. He notes, "...the one who is now alive is Mustapha Lebbai Annaviyar of Meeravodai. With his vibrant personality, he brought innovation to Kolattam performances by introducing romantic songs" (Haneefa, 2002, p. 9).

Mustafa Annaviyar has sung about the Saheehul Buhari Majlis recited in regional mosques in his Naattaar songs. Arabic words are also incorporated into these writings. "It (Buhari Majlis) will be held like a festival. This cultural festival has been sung by Mustafa Annaviyar." This collection was published by the Mavadichenai Rural Development Society, consisting of 45 songs printed at Batticaloa Rajan Press under the supervision of Moulavi M.H.M. Mahroof. The title of the book is *Saheehul Bukariyin Sinthanaiyum Sirappum* (Idrees, 2015, pp. 11-12). Although these songs are primarily in Tamil, they incorporate a significant number of Arabic words. This blending of languages reflects the cultural and religious influence of Islam in the region, where Arabic is the language of religious texts and practices. The inclusion of Arabic terms adds a layer of religious significance and connects the Tamil lyrics to Islamic traditions, making the songs culturally rich and resonant for the Muslim community.

4.3.3 Pakkeer Baith

The songs of those who identify as Bhawas or Pakkirs, accompanied by the rhythmic sound of the 'Dahra' (beating the daff), are known as Pakkeer Baith. People were fond of the 'Dahra' music and the songs of the Bhawas, and there was a tradition of listening to these songs on special days. Even today, in many places in the Eastern Province, the descendants of Pakkeers continue to practice their traditional art of Pakkeer Baith. Their music, often performed solo or in pairs or trios, was also used in Sufi music (Anas, 2007, p. 74). Both "Pakkeer" and "Baith" are Arabic words. This type of music was primarily performed at wedding events. "After the marriage agreement is concluded, the groom is taken to the bride's house. During this procession, they recite the 'Baith' and escort him on foot with honor" (Ismail, 2015, p. 24). "When the practice of bringing in Paraiyar performers declined, the tradition of inviting 'Bawas' to play 'Dahra' and sing songs emerged after 1975" (Peer Mohamed and Haneefa, 2010, pp. 11-12).

Although these songs were once popular among the Muslims of the KPW and KPC divisions, they have largely disappeared today. Baiths such as "Nooru Mas'ala," "Thousand Mas'ala," "Viswaththu Naachchiyar Sarithram," "Peer Samaththai Hadeeth," "Fathima Naachchiyar Wasiyath," "Ali (Rali) Baith," "Kattupa Sahib," and "Nabigal Naayagam Baith" were predominantly sung by the Bawas living in the area.

These Baiths have been sung for over 100 years. However, many of the Bawas who knew how to sing them are no longer alive (Tahir Bawa, 2021). These songs also incorporate Arabic words that have been adapted into the local dialect. This means that while the songs are primarily in the local language, they include Arabic terms that have become part of the everyday speech in the region. The use of these Arabic words reflects the influence of Arabic culture and religious practices on the local language, blending the two linguistic traditions in a way that feels natural and familiar to the community.

4.3.4 Kuravai

Kuravai is a significant tradition among the Muslims of the KPW and KPC divisions, influenced by Arab culture. This art form is unique to the Eastern Province, where Kuravai refers to the sweet sound women produce by placing their finger on their upper lip. It plays a prominent role in weddings and other events. In the past, women from the town would also gather to participate. Kuravai has its origins in Arabia, and similar customs are still observed in countries like the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and Egypt. Anthropologist Margaret Mead notes in one of her books that Kuravai has been practiced in villages along the Nile since ancient times (Ramseen, 1999, p. 24).

V. CONCLUSION

Sri Lankan Muslim theatre has developed its own unique identity among the Muslim community. Due to the close religious, educational, economic, and diplomatic ties Sri Lankan Muslims have with the Arabic language, this influence is also evident in their theatrical activities. The Muslims in the KPW and KPC divisions, a part of the Sri Lankan Muslim population, have a long history in theatre. They practice various theatrical elements such as drama, singing, dance, Villu Paattu, Kolattam and Bakker Baiths, Gaseetha songs, and Kuravai, all of which show traces of Arabic cultural influence. In recent times, discussions have emerged about revitalizing traditional theatres in Sri Lanka. There is an expectation that theatre will serve as a representative of society and become a practical platform for expressing social issues. "This represents the highest level of theatre's social acceptance. The venue belongs to the community. Theatre should adapt and evolve according to social dynamics, reflecting the needs, likes, and dislikes of society. Its foundation is to support and guide the emotions of both society and individuals" (Seltran, 2021). In this context, Muslim theatre also requires significant revitalization. The renewal of traditional Muslim theatre should focus on both content and format. Therefore, this study suggests that regeneration efforts should be conducted in a manner that respects and preserves Islamic principles and religious ideologies.

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