



# FOLK CULTURE AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AMONG THE MUSLIMS OF KERALA: KOLKALI AS A CASE

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**Abstract:** Muslims of Kerala adopted several visual art forms from folk culture, Hinduism and other religions and sects. They adopt it and make suitable changes. Of the several art forms of Kerala, popular among the Muslims are: *Kolkali*, *Vattakali*, *Parichamuttu Kali*, *Qisa Patt*, *Jinn Padappatt* and *Oppana*. *Kolkali* is widespread in Kerala. It is related to *Kalaripayattu*. It is a folk-art performance in Kerala. It begins with the holy prayer and praises God (Allah). Most of the time, the number of performers is under sixteen. The dance performers move in a circle, striking small sticks and keeping rhythm with special steps. The circle expands and contracts as the dance progresses. The accompanying music gradually rises in pitch and the dance reaches its climax. Participants wear different costumes unlike the Hindus and there is no traditional lamp in the middle. Many of the body postures, choreography and foot work of the *Kolkali* characters are taken directly from *Kalaripayattu*. The origin of the art can be traced back to ancient days when *Kalaripayattu*. Both primary and secondary data are used for the study. Qualitative analysis as used as the methodology of the study. In the present scenario the folk culture is coming back to the above said community in new style, that's why the present study is significant in its nature.

**Index Terms -** *Kolkali*, *Oppana*, *Kalaripayattu*, *Thadavu*, *Qiza*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Islam is the second largest religion in Kerala about 26.56%, only surpassed by Hinduism. The calculated Muslim population in Kerala state is 8,873,472.<sup>1</sup> Kerala, a state in the south-west region of the country, is a lush paradise of pretty mountains and valleys. It shares border with Karnataka to the north, north-east and Tamil Nadu to the south and south-east. To the west, 200 to 300 km away from its pristine coastline, are the Lakshadweep islands. Nature's bounty, vibrant culture and an exotic cuisine bespeak the land's tourist slogan "God's Own Country".<sup>2</sup> The Kerala State was formed on November 1, 1956 after the

reorganisation of states on a linguistic basis. An eventful history and a rich heritage of arts and science make the state unique. The cultural heritage of the land paved way for the evolution of a progressive society. The state has a reputation for communal harmony. Kerala was the first place in the Indian sub-continent to host Christianity and Islam. The country's first church and mosque are situated at Kodungallur in the Kerala state.<sup>3</sup>

Kerala has a rich tradition of diverse art forms. Most of the art forms are unique and related to religion, their worship and rituals. The culture of Kerala is reflected in its cuisine, clothing, art, and dance. The state's architecture is marked by intricately carved temples and traditional wooden homes, while its literature and art forms like Kathakali and Mohiniyattam have gained attention all over the world. 'Cultural institutions' is the term used to collectively denote all the institutions functioning under the aegis of the State Department of Culture. These include various academies, institutes, departments and memorial building which carry out their activities with the financial aid of the Government and in particular, the Department of Culture.<sup>4</sup>

The outstanding culture of the state of Kerala is a blend of both Indian and Dravidian styles. The different folk cultures of Kerala are Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, and Kalaripayattu. Kathakali. It is one of the most famous dance forms of India. It is a combination of Opera, Ballet, and Masque. The state takes pride in preserving its ancient traditions, which are showcased through dance forms like Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, and Theyyam, as well as martial arts like Kalaripayattu. These art forms reflect the rich cultural legacy of Kerala and continue to enthral audiences worldwide.<sup>5</sup> The most important traditional art forms of Kerala are Kathakali, Kalaripayattu, Mayilpeeli Thookkam, Koodiyattam, Theyyam, Mohiniyattam, Thullal, Padayani, Pulikali, Thiruvathirakali, Chakyarkoothu, Chavittunadakam, etc.

The dancers wear heavy makeup and colourful costumes and amaze everyone with their elegant body movements. Each dance form is practised in various communities in different parts of Kerala.<sup>6</sup>

## II. KOLKALI: A FOLK CULTURE

The Muslims of Kerala have maintained a distant cultural entity in Kerala. As a community, its contribution to art and culture of Kerala is significant. When they followed the tenets of Islam, they had not hesitated in accepting the cultural moorings of Kerala. It was a matter of symbiosis and assimilation. Kolkali's origins can be traced to the Hindu temples. The Muslim community has also rendered invaluable contribution to this folk art. Payyannur in Kannur district occupies a prominent place in Kolkali. Anidil Raman Ezhuthachan of Payyannur has written a lot of devotional songs for Kolkali. With a history of about 200 years, Kolkali is a folk-art form performed in the North Malabar region of Kerala. It is said to have drawn elements from Kalaripayattu, a martial art practised in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.<sup>7</sup> Usually, there are about 16 performers on stage who move about in a circle, striking small sticks and keeping rhythm with special steps. The circle expands and contracts as the dance progresses. Here, one can see two groups of players, one inside and the other outside. As they keep changing positions, this is termed as 'Kolkali'. Even then, the players come back to their original positions.<sup>8</sup>

The pitch of the music rises and the dance reaches its climax. Akin to Poorakali, Kolkali has also drawn elements from Kalaripayattu. The body postures, choreography and foot work are very similar to that

of Kalaripayattu. The Vandanam, Kalithozhal and Chinthu are found in Poorakali also. Kolkali begins with Vandanakali. Subramanian and Ganapathy are praised. This is followed by other types of dances in different tempos. It is observed that Kolkali blends rhythms. The Kolkali songs are mixed with devotional stories describing regional Gods. The origin of Kolkali can be traced to the Hindu temples. The Muslim community has also rendered invaluable contribution to this folk art.<sup>9</sup>

One can see several groups of enthusiastic youth of Payyannur and neighbouring areas performing Kolkali. In the past, women took active part in Kolkali. The women's playing was referred to as Kolattam. In Kolattam, the emphasis was on dance steps. Though rare, women's groups do exist. Kolkali is performed by troupes from Muslim, Christians and Harijans communities.<sup>10</sup> Paithal Mararakkan, Karun Gurikkal, Ampadi Marakkan, Gopalan Gurikkal, Hussan Kuttikurikkal, Abdu Gurikkal, Ibrahim Gurikkal, E. T. Hassan Gurikkal, M K P Muhammad Koya Gurikkal, Thikkodi Mammad Gurikkal, Maimutty Gurikkal (Paipa), etc. were the prominent ones.

Kokkali is performed by 12 to 24 performers who move rhythmically in a circle around the ceremonial lamp by tapping their feet along with striking of the wooden sticks held in their hands. The dancing circle gets expanded and contracted as the dance progress and reaches the climax, when the music reaches a certain pitch. The vibrant dancing steps are accompanied by vocal music sung in the background. The dance starts in a slow tempo and gathers momentum into a fast tempo during the climax.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.1 Etymology of Kolkali

The literal meaning of Kolkali is 'dance with sticks' as 'Kol' means 'stick' and 'Kali' means 'dance'.<sup>12</sup> It could easily have been one among those many folk-art forms that have faded into oblivion for want of practitioners or an audience. Thanks to the dedicated townsfolk of Payyannur, in Kannur district, though, Payyannur Kolkali, an esoteric version of the Kolkali, continues to thrive, at least, in the locality and its surrounding villages. Comprehensively documenting the nuances of this art form and the natives' efforts to conserve the folk-art form is the documentary 'Oru Deshathinte Kala', 'The Art of a Locale'. The 35-minute film is, perhaps, the first effort of its kind to bring together the myths, history, lyrics, music, traditional methodology and modern practises associated with the art form.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2 Performance of Kolkali Dance

Kolkali dance has borrowed certain characteristics from Kalaripayattu. The body postures, choreography and foot work are very similar to that of Kalaripayattu. The performance of this rhythmic dance requires great control of steps. The interesting part of Kolkali is that people of all ages can participate in it. The participants perform the dance, by moving about in circular patterns, striking sticks and engaging in small steps, along-with the rhythm. The circle get expanded and contracted as the dance progress further. This dance form reaches its climax, when the music played rises at a certain pitch.<sup>14</sup> Around 12 to 24 dancers move rhythmically in a circle around the ceremonial lamp called 'Nilavilakku', tapping their feet along with long wooden sticks held in their hands. The vibrant steps are accompanied by the background vocal music consisting of meaningless syllables followed by folk songs. At the beginning of the dance, it starts slowly but reaches a fast tempo creating an interesting climax. There are diverse choreographic patterns in the dance. Muslim Kolkali is similar to the Kolkali practiced by the nearby area; however, the only difference

is that, only the men folk participate in it. It has seven steps are: Otta, Meenkali, Marinjadi, Markali, Meenfo, Poottu, Thadavu.

### 2.3 Musical Instruments of Kolkali Dance

The songs in Kolkali dance are mixed with devotional stories describing regional Gods. The sound of the sticks is the main music of this dance. However, musical instruments like Chenda, Elathalam, Mathalam and Chengala accompany this dance. Sometimes, the dance is performed on a specially constructed wooden stage thus it is also called 'Thattinmelkali'. The dancers perform this dance by wearing traditional attires.<sup>15</sup> Usually it is performed once in a year after the paddy harvest during the month of April. The farmers and all the villagers celebrate the festival together. This can be exhibited either in day or in the night. No special stage is used. Costumes varied from place to place. A cap on head, green or black scarf round the waist or a cloth round the head, a banyan round the torso and they wear a dhoti (mundu) with check pattern.<sup>16</sup>

The Vandanam, Kalithozhal and Chinthu are found in Poorakali also. The body postures, choreography and foot work are very similar to that of Kalaripayattu. The songs are mixed with devotional stories describing regional Gods of Hindu Temples. Mappila songs are prized such things. Kolkali is more popular among Muslim men. In the past, women took active part in Kolkali. The women's playing was referred to as Kolattam. In Kolattam, the emphasis was on dance steps.

### 2.4 Different types of Kolkali

There are two forms of Kolkali popular in Kerala: Payyannur Kolkali and Mappila (Muslim) Kolkali. Kolkali usually begins with Vandanakali where Lord Subramanian and Lord Ganapathy are praised, and is followed by other styles of dances in diverse tempos. The songs of Kolkali unfold devotional tales of regional Gods. Every dancer moves in accordance with a close pattern, without touching each other or missing a beat. As the dance advances to the end, the dancers move in vigorous steps, with sweeping movements and turns. Kolkali is widespread among the Dravidians. It has exerted a great influence in the folk-dance forms of Bengal, Gujarat, Punjab, and Maharashtra. In Tamil Nadu, this art form is referred to as Kolattam and in Andhra Pradesh, as Kolamu. Kolkali is now a popular item in Kerala school youth festival, which is supposed to be the biggest cultural event in Asia. Women are not permitted to participate in this folk dance. This traditional rule is followed by all island residents. The songs used for Kolkali should be melodious and traditional Mappilappattu. Judgment will be based on the basis of originality of song, rhythm, movements (maithayam), formation, foot works, and overall effect.

### 2.5 Kolkali - Parichakali

Kolkali-Parichakali is a popular folk dance in southern Kerala and Lakshadweep. 'Kol' refers to 'stick', and 'Paricha' means 'shield'. The dancers enact fight scenes while holding wooden mock weapons. The performance begins slowly, but gradually increases in tempo until it reaches a frenzy-like climax. The dancers move in a circle, striking small sticks and using unique moves to keep time. As the dance progresses, the circle widens and contracts.

## 2.6 Kolkali-Parichakali Kolkali

Kolkali-Parichakali Kolkali is a popular folk dance of Kerala with rhythmic beating of sticks held in the dancers' hands is thought to have been around for over a millennium. Dancers sing and dance in circles around a Nilavilakku (traditional metal lamp). Despite the fact that the dancers separate to form different patterns, they never miss a beat. As the accompanying music gradually rises in pitch and the performance reaches its climax, the pace and rhythm of the dance change from phase to phase.

The Kolkali dance begins slowly. As the music develops momentum, it gradually picks up speed and moves toward a quicker pace, portraying their enthusiasm, delight, and ardor. Typically, folk tunes are used to accompany this traditional dance.<sup>17</sup>

### III. OTHER FOLK ARTS FORMS AMONG MUSLIMS OF KERALA

#### 3.1 Oppana

A bride draped in dazzling attire and decked with ornaments sits at the centre. Her friends and relatives sing and dance around her, clapping their hands rhythmically to the tunes of a Mappilappattu (traditional Muslim folk song). This is Oppana, an entertainment dance form prevalent among the Muslim community, usually performed by women during weddings. A celebration of happiness, this dance is also performed on Maarkkalyanam, Vayassariyikkal and Naalppathukali, marking important moments in the life of a woman. This dance is also performed by men, on some occasions, to entertain the bridegroom. The origins of Oppana can be traced back to Ishal, a musical element of Mappilappattu. The art form which is considered to be at least five centuries old requires a minimum of ten people to perform.<sup>18</sup>

Instruments like harmonium, ganjira, tabla and elathalam add more charm to the graceful movements of the dancers. The style in which the Oppana is performed might vary since there are two types. Oppana Chaayal, Oppana Murukkam. During Chaayal, there is no clapping of hands, whereas when Murukkam is performed, rhythmic clapping accompanies the song.<sup>19</sup>

#### 3.2 Duffmuttu

Duffmuttu is an art form performed in a group by Muslims of the Malabar region in Kerala. The name comes from 'Duffu', also known as 'Thappitta', a shallow, round percussion instrument made of wood or animal skin, which is used in the performance. One member of the group sings the lead with the other performers forming the chorus, as they simultaneously beat on the duffu and move in circles according to the rhythm of the song. The performers may be six or more in number. They sit or stand facing each other holding the 'duffu' in one hand, and dance synchronously, with incredible suppleness of body.<sup>20</sup> There is a swift switching of the 'duffu' between the hands of the performers, and the steps might never look complete as they flow through their swaying bodies without any interruption. The sweeping flow of the body and the instrument makes it appear that the mind and the body of the dancers are completely in sync with the pulse of the song. The rhythmic beat on the 'duffu' controls the tempo and the movements of the dancers. The songs are often in the form of tributes to martyrs and saints.

### 3.3 Aravanamuttu

Aravanamuttu or Arabanamuttu is a dance form performed in a group, and is prevalent among Muslims in the North Malabar region of Kerala. It is named after a hand-held, single-sided flat drum called 'Arabana', which has its origins in Arabia. Similar to the Duffmuttu, another art form prevalent in the region, Aravanamuttu marks its difference in the size of the instrument used. The drums used in Aravanamuttu are smaller and wider. The dance is considered a bit more complicated. Aravanamuttu is usually performed to welcome dignitaries. The leader begins the performance with a song, which is followed by the group with the rhythmic beating on the Aravana.<sup>21</sup> The songs are often a tribute to martyrs and heroes. It is a riveting sight to watch the dancers, clad in traditional Muslim attire, toss the drums over their heads and swirl from time to time, while maintaining the rhythm and without losing a single beat.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Kolkali is so essential to them and so popular that each Islands in Lakshadweep has a number of Kolkali performing groups. It is also a well-known traditional dance in Kerala. Since Kerala and Lakshadweep are so close geographically, they are almost identical and also have certain cultural commonalities. From the origin of Kokali in South India, the Muslims are regularly used it has a cultural performing art in marriage functions at the house of bride and groom in the night. Now a days it is a common cultural event performing all the communities in Kerala and one of the main items of the School Kalolsavam and University Youth festivals. Kolkali remarked as the male oriented one, because it needs a high physical strength. The flexibility of body and mind as well as the coordination is one of the major criteria for the successful completion of the Kolakali art form. Although this art form is widely using and enjoyed everyone irrespective of religion, region, language, gender, etc.

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