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## **NEGOTIATING RELIGION AND CUSTOMS: ANALYSIS OF MARRIAGE AMONG THE MATRILINEAL MAPPILA MUSLIMS OF KOZHIKODE**

### ***Abstract***

*Mappilas are one of the surviving matrilineal Muslim communities in the Indian Ocean littoral. Despite several changes that have come into their inheritance patterns, they have succeeded to continue their matrilineal and matrilocal heritage. One factor that has facilitated the resilience of matrilineality among them is their marriage system and their preference for alliances within their matrilineal community. This paper specifically investigates the institution of marriage among Mappilas of Kozhikode and how they have aligned their lives and marriage customs with the principles of patrilineal Islam. The information for this paper was collected firsthand by attending the weddings of matrilineal Mappilas and interviewing the members of the community. The paper highlights the various customs and marriage ceremonies that are specific to Mappilas of Kozhikode and how they have tried to balance the features of matrilineality without compromising the requirements of patrilineal Islam.*

**Keywords:** *Matrilineity, Islam, Malabar, Mappila, Muslim, Marriage customs, Kozhikode.*

### **Introduction**

Kerala, one of the southern states of India, is known for its matrilineal heritage. Matrilineality in Kerala is known as *marumakkathayam*, which literally means succession through nephew or sister's children. Lineage was traced from female ancestress, and property was inherited through female line. The influence of matrilineality was most prevalent in northern Kerala, also referred to as Malabar. Malabar was the home of many matrilineal communities including matrilineal Payyanur Brahmins and matrilineal Mappila Muslims of Kerala. Practice of matrilineality by these two communities is a subject of significance because they are basically patrilineal communities elsewhere. Brahmins in other parts of the country including those in central and south Kerala are patrilineal, and Muslims worldwide follow patrilineal family organisational patterns, with their religious text emphasising the same. Other Asian

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matrilineal communities known to be operating within the fold of Islam include the Minangkabau of Sumatra in Indonesia (Kato, 2007), an offshoot of Minangkabau in Negri Sembilan in Malaysia (Peletz, 1988), Moors of Sri Lanka (McGilvray 1989), Laccadive Islanders off the southwest coast of India (Dube, 1969) and Navayats of Kanara (D'Souza, 1955).

According to Gough (1961: 415), Muslims in Kerala, also known as Mappilas, are Sunni Muslim group originated from 8th century Arab traders and indigenous converts to Islam. The period of Islam's origin in Kerala is a subject of debate among scholars. However, the Arab trade with Malabar and Kerala began long before Arabia embraced Islam (Koya, 1976: 195), and hence, the early Arabs who came to Kerala were not Muslims. The Arabs, when they visited Malabar for trade, did not bring their women but married the local women (Logan, 1951: 195, D'Souza, 1955: 4). There are several theories behind the origin of matrilineality among Mappilas. One version is that Kolathnad (north Malabar) had its own social system, which the subjects of the kingdom were supposed to follow (Balakrishnan 1981: 122). Logan (Cited in Moore, 1905: 323-325) believed that in the case of Mappilas of north Malabar, Muhammadan Law is the original law and *marumakkathayam* rules were adopted later. This, however, is refuted by several others. Moore (Ibid.: 325) suggests that Muslims of north Malabar were followers of *marumakkattayam* rules long before they embraced Islam. Koya (1976, 198) too opines that even prior to the rise of Islam, matrilocality must have been the most convenient arrangement for Arab traders who visited Malabar and entered into temporary marriage with local women.

In his book *Customs and Law in Anglo Muslim Jurisprudence*, Ali (1938: 37-40) writes that on converting to Islam, the Mappilas of north Malabar did not change their laws and customs, to which they were accustomed to for generations, all at once and take to the Muslim law. He observes that the Arab priests, being very tolerant, converted the people of Malabar without any regard to what they practiced (except in the essential matter of faith in God and acceptance of Mohammed as Prophet), so much so that instead of making the converts profess Muslim law, these priests themselves adopted the local practices in many respects; thus, they eventually became one with the native population. This, according to him, explains the origin of various matrilineal features such as matrilocality, matrilineage and inheritance based on *marumakkathayam*. He also observes that the early Arabs who left South Arabia were not learned in theology or Muslim law but were commonplace men. Hence, when they settled in a foreign land, they adopted the laws and customs of the people among whom they settled and became a part of the native population. Puthenkalam (1977, 199) also opines that Hindu converts to Islam retained the elements of the social system that they were accustomed to even after conversion. According to Kathleen Gough (1962, 415), the Mappilas who settled in central Kerala continued patrilineality while the Mappilas of north Kerala

adopted matriliney. The conversion of matrilineal Hindu ruler of the Arakkal Royal Family into Islam also saw the practice of Islam and traditional *marumakkathayam* features going hand in hand. This in a way motivated other converts to continue their earlier system of *marumakkathayam*.

Kerala has undergone changes over the past years. The Hindu Marumakkathayam Act of 1932 and the later Kerala Joint Hindu Family System (Abolition) Act, 1975, abolished the joint family system including *marumakkathayam taravads*<sup>1</sup> and *tavazhis*<sup>22</sup> among Hindus in the state of Kerala. Matriliney has disappeared from many communities that were practicing it. The present-day Kerala society is considered as patrilineal and patriarchal despite its matrilineal heritage. It is under these circumstances that matrilineal features of matrilocality and matrilineage still continue to exist among the Mappila Muslims of Malabar. The coastal regions of Kannur, Thalasherry, Mahe, Kozhikode and Ponnani are the major areas in north Kerala where Muslims follow matriliney. Some areas such as Edava<sup>3</sup> of south Kerala also recorded the presence of matriliney among Muslims. The rest of the Muslims in Kerala are patrilineal following patrilineal descent and patrilocality. Thus, in Kerala, there are Muslims who follow father right (*makkathayam*) and those who follow mother right (*marumakkathayam*). However, unlike in earlier times, the laws of inheritance are according to Sharia or Islamic law among both the groups.

### **Objective of the Paper and Methodology**

The matrilineal community of Kozhikode district is concentrated mainly in the urban areas of Kozhikode Corporation and to a lesser extent in the town of Vadakara and Quilandy. The major residential hub of Matrilineal Mappilas residing in Kozhikode city is locally referred to as Thekkepuram. The residents here, referred to as Koyas, are a trading community and include descendants from Arab traders and local converts (Sebastin, 2016: 89). There are several social and cultural practices that make them different from not only the patrilineal Muslims of the state but also from other matrilineal Mappilas of Malabar. D'souza (1976: 141-167) has given an ethnographic description about various marriage customs among Mappilas of Malabar. Some of these customs have undergone transitions, but at the same time, efforts are made to maintain their traditional spirits. But the most important change that is evident is the attempts of Mappilas to bring their matrilineal practices within the requirements of Islamic injunctions (Kottakkunnummal, 2014:9). This paper aims to make an ethnographic study of the marriage customs of matrilineal Muslims of Thekkepuram from the Kozhikode district of Kerala and how these customs have enabled them to maintain their matrilineal exclusivity. At the same time, the paper compares these customs with the marriage customs of patrilineal Muslims in the rest of Kerala and discusses the negotiations these matrilineal Muslims make with patrilineal Islam.

The data for this paper was collected during the period 2015–16. During my field work for my PhD thesis on matrilineal Muslim women of North Kerala, I was intrigued by the several marriage customs that were unique to this community. The discussions with the respondents as well as some eminent personalities from different walks of life helped in gaining a comprehensive understanding about the various dimensions of the Mappila matriline in general and their marriage customs in particular. Anganwadi Survey Register served as the sample frame for drawing the list of respondents, as it maintains the information about each household in the area allotted to each Anganwadi<sup>4</sup>. I took the help of Anganwadi workers in this area to get introduced to these households. Once I was able to establish a rapport with the women in these households, they welcomed me to their homes. I was able to carry out interviews with members residing in matrilineal extended families as well as those residing in huge ancestral homes called *tharavads*. I interviewed 40 respondents from Thekkepuram area. The primary data for the paper was collected through in-depth interviews with respondents from this area as well as first-hand information collected by participating in marriage functions here. This paper is an attempt to understand the unique marriage customs of matrilineal Mappilas of Thekkepuram and how they have negotiated their matrilineal marriage customs to incorporate them into the fold of patrilineal Islam.

### **Marriage customs among the matrilineal Muslims of Kozhikode**

The marriage customs of the residents of Thekkepuram highlight the features of matrilineal social organization on one hand and reveal their adaptations to the tenets of Islam on the other. With the Matrilineal inheritance giving way to Islamic law of inheritance, the features that separate matrilineal Muslims of Thekkepuram from patrilineal Muslims in the rest of the state, are matrilocality, where a woman continues residing at her own house even after marriage, and matrilineage, where lineage is traced through mother's side. Variation is also seen in the food, dress, dialect and in various customs followed especially those associated with marriage. Other than the core social contract called the *Nikkah* that ceremonise a Muslim marriage, there are several differences, right from the custom of fixing the marriage to the various functions associated with the wedding among the patrilineal and matrilineal Muslims in Kerala.

### ***Mate Selection***

There is a general dislike among matrilineal Muslims to find a suitable partner for their children from patrilineal Muslims outside Malabar. Perhaps one factor that is keeping the system of matriline intact among the matrilineal Mappilas of Kozhikode is their system of endogamous marriages within their own kinship system. During the fieldwork, respondents told me that they always prefer alliances for their children from within their matrilineal kinship groups.

There was a general aversion towards marriage proposals from patrilineal Muslims elsewhere in Kerala. Most respondents made it clear that they will not look for an alliance that requires their daughters to leave their natal home and settle in the husbands' house. However, there seems to be no disagreement against the couple setting up a nuclear household. The same goes in the case of boys. The parents prefer their daughter-in-law to stay in her own natal house rather than staying with them on a permanent basis. The reasons cited for this disapproval of alliances from patrilineal household are mainly concern about the security of the girl at her in-laws' residence, the fear of lack of freedom or difficulty in adjustment that she might have to face there, desire for the parents to always have their daughters close to them, considering daughter as better security than daughters-in-law during their old age and, above all, the fear or reluctance to change a cultural system they are accustomed to. One respondent voiced her concern, "how can you send your daughter to a house where there are other male members who are not her natal kin?" This concern not only expressed the fear for the security of girls in their husband's house but also proves that matrilocality is viewed as an arrangement that helps to uphold one's religious dogma of avoiding male members who are not one's direct blood relations. However, this dislike for proposals from patrilineal families is not one-sided, as there is a general aversion towards matrilocality among the patrilineal Muslims elsewhere in Kerala too. Men who reside in their wives' house are generally looked down upon. Patrilineal families encourage a proposal from matrilineal families only if the girl shifts her residence to the boy's house after marriage.

The major criteria among matrilineal Muslims of Thekkepuram for selecting a boy have always been his character and the status of the *tharavad* or family lineage into which he belongs. In recent times, importance is also being given to the boys' education and job because female education seems to have improved during the past years where more girls are taking up professional courses like medicine, engineering and teaching. Lack of higher education among boys from the same community may possibly be one of the agents for social change from matriliney to patriliney in this area. The criteria for a girl tend to be her looks and the status of her family. Her education and employment play little role even now. The age of marriage for girls tends to be between 18 and 21 and for boys, 24 upward. D'Souza (1976) points out that in patrilineage, marriage between brothers' children is not encouraged as they belong to same patrilineal *tharavads*. In matrilineal Mappila system, however, there is no objection to marriage between children of two brothers or of a brother and a sister as they belong to different matrilineal *tharavads*.

### ***Fixing the marriage***

The suitable girl or boy is usually spotted by their relatives at a social gathering or through a common relative of either side. Once the parents on

either side are satisfied with the proposal, the boy and girl get a chance to meet each other at a relative's house or at a restaurant or shopping mall, which seem to be the most popular meeting places. These places are preferred mainly to avoid any embarrassment on either side if the proposal does not materialize. Arrangement of marriage among the rest of the patrilineal Muslims are by bridegroom's party including the boy meeting the girl at the girl's residence and then providing their opinion through the intermediate person who is usually the marriage broker who brings in the proposal. This practice called *pennukanal* (literally means seeing the girl) does not seem to exist among the Mappilas of Thekkepuram because being a close-knit community, most of the families know each other well. The preference for a suitable match within the matrilineal community has even led to marriages being arranged even without the boy and girl meeting. This happens when either of the parties is settled abroad and the alliance is fixed through relatives back home. However, the boy and the girl are shown each other's photographs, speaks to each other over the phone and their consent is taken.

When the initial enquiries are done, marriage is formally fixed by a *vakkukodukal* ceremony (literally means giving word) attended by the older male members of both the sides. On some occasions, the girl is gifted a gold bangle or a gold coin by the boy's side, as a token of being accepted to their family. *Nikkah* soon follows the fixing of marriage. Among the patrilineal Muslims, this function is as important as the wedding itself. The event is called '*mala edal*' where bride-to-be is gifted with gold ornaments by the boy's side. It is an official announcement for the fixing of the marriage.

### ***Dowry***

Dowry, as a payment made to the groom by the father or kinsmen of the bride, has never been a part of marriage in Islam. The only transaction sanctioned by Islam on such an occasion is the payment of a contracted amount called *mahr* by the groom to the bride. The *mahr* is solely the property of the bride. That said, the existence of dowry among matrilineal Muslims of Malabar including the members of Kozhikode has been recorded by several authors (Gough 1961, 430, Puthenkalam 1977, 207). It is also widespread among the patrilineal Muslims. The demand for dowry can range from lakhs of rupees to cars and ornaments based on the status of the groom's family. However, in this study it was found that dowry system was practically nonexistent among the Mappilas of Thekkepuram. According to the respondents, a demand for dowry is never made in the present-day marriages. This, however, is not the case among patrilineal Muslims in the rest of the Kerala and among the matrilineal Muslims of Kannur and Thalassery (Fathima, 2021: 42). A respondent commented that 'it's a disgrace if one among us ask dowry. People tend to feel that boy and his family needs the girl's money to survive. But in their system (patrilineal) it is considered an honour for the families to give

and take dowry. Here we can marry a girl even with 10 sovereigns of gold, which is not possible there (patrilineal system)'. But the most resonated reason for no dowry, despite it being rampant among their matrilineal counterparts in the neighboring Kannur district, was their belief that dowry is forbidden in their religion. I was also told that for those who cannot afford, even the gold ornaments worn by the girl during the ceremony can be borrowed from someone else and later returned to them.

### ***Nikah***

Nikah is the most important ceremony in a Muslim marriage. Here the man asks another for the hand of the latter's ward or daughter in the presence of two witnesses, and then marries her by giving her *mahr*. Nikah and the feast offered after it called the *valima* are the only functions insisted by the religion; everything else are add-ons or factors that are borrowed from other cultures. Nikah of matrilineal Mappilas usually takes place in a mosque or at the bride's residence. Currently, however, wedding ceremonies in marriage halls are widespread<sup>5</sup>. In fact, there are several *tharavads* (ancestral homes) that have been converted into a commercial venue for weddings or a marriage hall. This in a way has helped in maintaining the grandness of *tharavads* that otherwise would have dilapidated without enough resources for its maintenance.

Among the matrilineal Muslims of Kozhikode, Nikah takes place at one of these two occasions: one, when Nikah ceremony takes place and cohabitation of the couple begins on the same day of the marriage, which is also the practice commonly followed by patrilineal Muslims of Kerala, and two, where Nikah (also known as *kaniyath* among matrilineal Mappilas) takes place as soon as the marriage is officially fixed by the elders, but cohabitation of the couple begins after another ceremony set on a later convenient date. This second function, which is also known as marriage or *kalyanam*, takes place within a time gap of six months to two years. The latter seems to be attaining prominence in the recent times, though it is criticised for its un-Islamic nature of keeping the boy and the girl away from each other even after legally being announced as husband and wife.

The reasons for this postponement of marriage are social as well as religious. Most of the marriages are fixed at the time the girl is 18 years old and, in these cases, she might have just started her college education. The delay of marriage thus helps the girl complete her education. This is actually an advantageous situation for the girls to improve their status by having more opportunities for higher education and jobs and moreover delaying the age of reproduction and childbirth. Another reason is that it gives parents time to plan for marriage especially the renovation of *Ara* or bride's chamber, which is an essential part of matrilineal marriages. There are situations where the boy is working abroad, and he may not have enough leaves to set aside for the

wedding functions. The Nikah ceremony at the earliest also helps the parents to rest down their worries regarding the risks involved with a 'mature girl'. Parents here appear to dread the possibility of love affairs and self-arranged marriages that seems to be on an increase.

There is also a religious reason behind this practice. The strict rules of Islam prevent a boy and girl from meeting each other unless the nikah ceremony is over. Religion plays a major part in the lives of people here. Contracting a nikah ceremony gives the couple the religious sanction to meet each other, go out with each other and even visit each other's houses, which is not possible for couple whose marriage has been officially fixed by the '*mala edal*' ceremony among patrilineal Muslims. In this case the girls in the matrilineal setup get more freedom and opportunity to know their groom than their counter parts in patrilineal setup. Some respondents told me that divorces have also happened during this period between nikah and kalyanam as the couple realizes the incompatibility with each other during this courtship period.

Once the nikah is over, the *mehr*, which is usually a gold chain, is handed over to girl's relatives. Sometimes, the boy ties it around the girl's neck when he comes to the girl's house the night of the wedding. Gifts, or *osaram* as it is known among the matrilineal Muslims, are given to the bride by the members of groom's family, including his father, mother and his other immediate kins. Exchange of garland takes place very rarely. These functions have more significance among the patrilineal Muslims than among the matrilineal Muslims of Kozhikode. Among the patrilineal Muslims, there are several functions that have been borrowed from other cultures like tying the *thali* or gold chain around the girl's neck by the groom, exchange of garlands, exchange of finger rings, and recently cutting the cake also seems to have found its place in Muslim weddings.

#### ***Ara or the bride's chamber***

The couple spend their first night at the girl's residence. *Arayil kotal* is the ceremony where the boy and girl are first led into their *ara* for their first night together. *Ara* or the bride's chamber is an exclusive matrilineal feature where husband shifts his residence to the bride's house. Husband resides in his wife's natal house, spends a large part of time there and contributes to the maintenance of his wife and children. *Ara* is the special room provided to the *puthiyapilla* (*puthiya* = new, *Mappila* = bridegroom) or the groom at the girl's residence. The main expenditure for a girl's marriage is the beautification of this room. There seems to be even a competition among the parents to provide the best *ara* for the daughter and the groom. However, sometimes it becomes a burden for the girls' parents especially those of low-income households.

Matrilineal joint families are now shifting towards matrilineal extended families or nuclear families. If a man can afford it, he may build a separate



house and live with his wife there. When a person builds a house, the best room is reserved to be used as his daughters' *ara* in future. Those who shift out of matrilineal joint families let their *aras* to be used for the other unmarried girls in the *tharavad*. An *ara* is decorated according to one's social status and with the latest furniture for the comfort of the groom. Air conditioning has become a common feature in any *ara*. Some *aras* are also provided with refrigerator and television. Among the high class, *aras* tend to be like a suite with two or three sections, that is, the sleeping area, the dressing area and a sitting area for the groom to entertain his friends. One *ara* even had a section that can be used as an office area for the groom. Lavish decorations are also done even if the couple is settling abroad soon after marriage.

The main function of the *ara*, other than being a bedroom for the couple, is to provide the maximum comfort for the groom who may otherwise feel like a stranger in his wife's house and may not be able to move about freely among his wife's female relatives who also live there. Thus, as one respondent said 'a *puthiyappila* is the master of his own chamber, but stranger in the house.' However, he also agreed that the boys of the present generation are more involved with the affairs of their wife's house rather than the those of the earlier generation. A *puthiyappila* divides his time between his natal home and his wife's house. The wives' elder kin call him *puthiyappila*, which literally means a bridegroom, throughout his life. This is a privilege enjoyed by men in matrilineal household unlike in patriliney where this kinship usage is only for the initial few days after marriage. He receives lavish hospitality and respect. Amongst all economical classes, careful politeness is given to these men.

Among patrilineal Muslims, the bride and the groom spend the first night at the bride's place, and the next day they are ceremoniously taken to the groom's house by a few relatives from his side. It is a common sight among the brides in patrilineal setup to shed tears while she sets out to her husband's house. In patrilineal system, after marriage, a woman does not belong to her father's family, while her membership in husband's family is conditional to how her in-laws receive her. But such a scenario is rare among the brides of the matrilineal families in Thekkepuram, as they never have to leave their home permanently. A woman is a full member of her matrilineal group and continues to be so even after marriage. She does not have to leave her surroundings that she has been accustomed to from childhood. The girl tends to visit her husband's house only for a day or two and rarely stays there for a longer period. Her visits are a matter of ceremonial obligations, and she is invited to the important occasions at her husband's natal home. The special privileges enjoyed by a man in his wife's house in a patrilineal system is extended to the woman here when she visits her in-laws.

### **Other marriage customs of matrilineal Mappilas**

Marriage customs of matrilineal Mappilas used be an elaborate function

of 40 days with various customs (D'Souza, 1976: 141-167). It takes several days until the bride and groom get to spend time with each other in their room. However, though some ceremonies continue to exist in a modified form, marriages among matrilineal Mappilas are now a matter of three or four days. Some customs no more exist such as brothers-in-law going to the groom's house to invite him to the bride's house or the custom of sending *mudiyum pavum* (3 bundles of rice and flowers) by the groom to the girl's house.

### ***Vettalakettu or the wedding eve***

The function on the wedding eve that is usually known as the *mylanchi* or mehendi (henna) function among the Muslims in general is called as *vettalakettu* or *vettilattu* among Kozhikode matrilineal Muslims. The ceremony of putting henna in the hands of the bride usually takes place a day before *vettilattu* function. During earlier times, the women in the household came together on the wedding eve to make small bundles of *vettila* or betel leaves, which were later distributed to the guests on the wedding day. Today, instead of the betel leaves, small packets of sweet areca nut, available in the market, are distributed to the female guests by the girl's mother or paternal aunt. The name *Vettalakettu* function however still lingers on (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: *Vettilakkattu* Function - Girls Trying to Recreate the Traditional Betel Leaf Bundles**

### ***Puthukam***

*Puthukam* is a function that takes place after the main ceremonies of the wedding are completed. It might be on the same day of the marriage or on the next day. Here, female relatives of the groom will come to the bride's house to take her to his house. There will be only limited number of guests from the boy's side, ranging from thirty to fifty. The guests are treated with a feast after which each person gets gifts from the host, which usually include

sweets, foreign chocolates and even articles like fancy items or showpieces. There is a general curiosity among everybody as to know what they will get as *puthukam* gift. Once the bride is taken to the husband's house, the female relatives from her side visit the groom's house on the same day for the reverse *puthukam*. There they also are presented the *puthukam* gifts. This is a function unique to matrilineal Muslims of Kozhikode (Figure 2).



Figure 2: *Puthukkam* Gifts

### ***The Feast***

Thekkepuram is known for its cosmopolitanism regarding food (Osella and Osella 2007a: 344). Food is a major part of the weddings here and it is linked to sociability and hospitality. When the wedding feast among patrilineal Muslims is never considered appropriate without the popular dish Biryani, among the matrilineal Muslims, traditionally, the feast on the wedding day is kept simple with ghee rice and special mutton or beef stew. However, the popularity of Biryani seems to have entered matrilineal weddings too. But the real extravaganza unfolds from the second day of the marriage. The first breakfast for groom at the bride's house, known as *puthiyappila nasta*, is set extensively with all sorts of chicken, mutton and fish dish that are the specialties of Malabar region. The sweet delicacies made of eggs and banana are essential items for the feast. Nontraditional items such as ice creams and puddings have also found their way along with the traditional items. The ladies in the house do not sleep the whole night to serve the feast next day. Groom's friends and his close male relatives also attend this breakfast. The influence of matriliney is quite evident as all the functions are mainly arranged by the girl or boy's maternal relatives rather than paternal relatives.

*Thakkaram* (Kozhikode dialect for *salkaram*) or the invitation for feast then follows at different relatives' houses. A major *salkaram* is the *ammayi thakkaram* (*ammayi* means mother-in-law<sup>6</sup>) or the invitation for feast extended by the girl's mother to the boy and his relatives and boy's mother to girl and her family. Both the families provide the most exquisite traditional food on these occasions. Even after the functions are over, special dishes are sent to each other's houses as a token of goodwill and respect to each other. Similar

custom also exists among patrilineal Muslims, but instead of cooked dishes, they exchange items such as sweets and fruits. This exchange among patrilineal Muslims is considered obligatory in nature.

### ***Friends of the bridegroom***

Friends of the groom tend to have a lot of importance in the functions here. They accompany the groom for all the occasions including going to the girl's house for the *arayil kootal* ceremony where the boy and girl are led into their *ara* for their first night together. (This function among patrilineal Muslims is a low-key affair attended by only the relatives of the girl.) There will be singing and dancing by the friends till late night. Sometimes they tend to demand gifts or even money for leaving the place, which at times offend the bride's relatives. According to some respondents, there has been situations where the groom has been taken in a bullock cart to the marriage venue and in another case, he was made to wear a school uniform while going to the girl's house for the first time. The main intention is to embarrass the groom in front of the bride's relatives. But there have been circumstances where these activities end up in a bad taste with the brides' relatives and they had to ask the friends of the groom to leave.

### ***Negotiating religion and customs***

According to Dube (1994, 1283), the matrilineal society appears incompatible with the ideology of Islam and there is a demand on Islam for adjustment and accommodation with the matrilineal social system. For the same reason, matrilineality among Mappilas has been criticized for its un-Islamic nature. The major bone of contention has been removed by the replacement of matrilineal inheritance with Sharia laws. Even then the criticisms hover around the matrilineal customary practices that are still being followed by the members. It seems that as an attempt to counter these, matrilineal Mappilas of Thekkepuram have given greater emphasis to religious rules in the private as well as public lives so that the principles of matrilineality work parallel unhampered.

Ossella and Ossella (2007b: 2), based on their study among matrilineal Muslims of Thekkepuram, have mentioned that there is a realization among Muslims that most of the Muslim socio-cultural practices are offshoot of other religious practices and thereby there is a deliberate attempt to shift away from these cultural and religious influences towards more Islamic idioms. The discourses of religious organisations like KNM have strengthened these efforts (Ossella and Ossella 2008, 334). Thus, I found that while the members were still holding to their customary features such as matrilocality and matrilineage, they were critical of other marriage customs that are common among patrilineal Muslims. There are no customs of tying the *Thali* (mangalsutra / gold chain), exchange of garland or glass of milk between the groom and the bride, gifting

a gold ring to the groom by the mother-in-law, checking the *rahukalam* or auspicious time, etc., which are quite common among patrilineal Muslims and other religions. For the same reason videography and photography, which are common elements for any Muslim marriage, are losing their popularity among the matrilineal Muslims of Thekkepuram and are considered as un-Islamic by many.

Interestingly, while these customs or practices are viewed as un-Islamic and the outcome of mixing with local traditions, many of the matrilineal practices despite being customary are being overlooked. The acculturation process due to the contacts with other religious and social groups have resulted in many new marriage customs among Muslims all over the world. Matrilineal Mappilas of Thekkepuram seem to deliberately undo these influences. The disregard for dowry is another example in this direction. The senior respondents whom I spoke with agreed that there existed customary dowry practices called *Kashipanam* and *Kadamvayippa* among this matrilineal community. But at present any sort of dowry demands is absent. The emphasis they place on religion as a reason for not practicing dowry is noteworthy. This is despite the rampant practice of dowry among matrilineal Mappilas in their neighbouring district, Kannur.

I had the opportunity to attend weddings at Thekkepuram, and it was interesting to find that marriage functions in Thekkepuram are arranged keeping in mind the prayer timings so that the guests can finish their obligatory *namaz* (prayers) before coming to the wedding function. Females and males offering their *namaz* at the wedding venue, even if it is a marriage hall, is a common sight. Even some marriage halls provide facilities for the guests to offer their prayer. This is quite an uncommon scene in patrilineal Muslim marriages. Another major difference between the wedding functions among patrilineal and matrilineal Muslims is the complete segregation of male and female guests among the latter. Among the patrilineal Muslims, male and female guests attend the wedding functions together in the same venue. For matrilineal Muslims of Thekkepuram, there is separate time for male and female guests to arrive at the venue, either on the same day where the male guests are expected to leave before the female guests arrive or separate functions are arranged for males and females on two different days. This has led to a scenario where we see women moving around with their female kins without male escorts. This freedom of movement is extended to other areas as well such as shopping, visiting a doctor and visiting a relative, where women do not depend on their men folk for leaving their house, thereby affording them freedom of mobility, a major dimension of autonomy (Fathima 2016: 168).

The clothes women wear during these functions also hint at their compliance with religious injunctions. Young girls wear colorful dresses but keeping within the regulations of Islamic dressing. Even the bride is seen

wearing a scarf covering her hair. In the recent times, there is also an increasing use of *Abhaya* (a long black dress that covers a woman's body, also referred to as *purdah*) among the Muslims of Kozhikode even while attending social functions like weddings. The reasons cited for this going back to Islamic dressing are mainly religious where there is an increase in awareness of and adherence to the requirements of piety among the people in general and women in particular (Osella and Osella 2007b, 9). Moreover, as one respondent pointed out, marriages among matrilineal Muslims have been always criticized for the huge expenses spent on clothes and other functions. A person was expected to change into new clothes for each function even if it falls on the same day. Thus, the change into *purdah* becomes an attempt to bring moderation into one's clothing. Many religious organizations have been preaching this point, and according to a respondent, the number of matrilineal women attending these religious discourses and Koran classes are on an increase.

One of the criticisms against matriliney is that it downplays the role of a husband and a father. Matrilineal Mappilas' compliance with the Islamic injunctions is also seen in the way they have strengthened the patriarchal role of father as the head of the family. Polyandry, a feature associated with matrilineal communities, has no role in Muslim matriliney as it is prohibited by religion. Domestic authority is the greatest with the husband as he provides for almost all of his wife's expenses even while she is residing matrilocally. This point was brought up by many female respondents as their main justification against criticism against matriliney. They opined that religion only prescribed that women have to be under the care of their husbands, not insisting on any particular residence pattern. A Mappila woman, who lives in her own house, continue residing with her husband and is under his financial support. There is a shift from the traditional role of control and authority of matrilineal kin to the more emotional and psychological support they provide to the women and children.

While matrilocality facilitates the avoidance of male affinal kins by a woman, a Mappila male, while residing at wife's house, is also expected to maintain customary distance from his wife's sisters, as insisted by the religion. This is made possible by Mappila male following duolocality, where he spends his time between his natal home and his wife's house. It is a common practice for these men to have their lunch at the mother's house and other meals with their wives. Therefore, even if Mappila matrilineal men are away from their natal home either following duolocality or neolocality, they are never alienated from their matrilineal descent group. While he is at his wife's house, he spends most of the time in his *ara*. Hence, he gets little opportunity to mingle with his wife's matrilineal kinsfolk. Once the husband builds a house on his own, he moves his family out of the matriloal household and become the head of his own nuclear family.

## **Conclusion**

Islam has had to adjust itself with the local beliefs, customs and traditions of the people who embraced it and the matrilineal system is one among them. The local customs of Mappilas have been criticised for detracting the importance attached to Islamic practices. However, from the above discussion about marriage customs, it is evident that the matrilineal Mappilas of Kozhikode, are trying to adhere to the strict Islamic regulations in a deeper level. When most of the customs and practices among the patrilineal Muslims are the result of borrowing from other cultures (there are exceptions), there is a deliberate effort to maintain the strict Islamic codes in the marriage customs of matrilineal Mappilas, thereby trying to overcome the criticisms raised against matrilineality. It is apparent that attempts are made to bring about a harmonious blend of matrilineal principles and patrilineal Islam by giving emphasis to *Sharia* so that features of matrilineality like matrilocality can continue unhampered. In other words, matrilineal features have been adjusted with the requirements of religion and explained to fit into the religious framework of Islam, and Matrilineal Mappilas of Thekkepuram have been successful in bringing about this harmonious blend.



**Figure 3: Puthiyappila Salkkaram (Feast for Groom)**

### *Notes*

- 1 A taravad in the matrilineal system is a marumakkathayam family home, consisting of all the descendants in the female line of one common female ancestress.
- 2 Thavazhis are created by the division of the taravad, and it comprises of a mother and her children and their descendants in the female line.
- 3 The origin of matrilineality among these Muslims is traced to the migration of men for job while women and children were left under the care of matrilineal kins but maintained by the husband (Puthenkalam 1977, 199).
- 4 Anganwadis are childcare services set up by Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Refer the cite for more information <https://icds-wcd.nic.in/>

- 5 However, with the onset of pandemic, ceremonies have become low key affairs with nikkah taking place in house of the bride or the groom. There have been instances of nikkah being taking place online too.
- 6 *Ammayi* means aunt or mother's brother's wife in Malayalam. However, this term is reserved for mothers- in-law among Mappilas of Thekkepuram, while rest of the Muslims in Kerala use the term *umma* or mother for the mother-in-law. Similarly Paternal grandmother is referred to as *Itha* among matrilineal Mappilas of Thekkepuram and her residence is called *Ithokam* (literally paternal grandmother's house). The kinship usage *Itha* among Muslims in Kerala is used to address respectfully an older sister or older women in general. These terms such as *Ithokam* which refers to one's father's house as paternal grandmother's house (and not as grandfather's house), also play a role in preserving the importance of women in matrilineal households.

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