

Oppana: Problem elements in tradition

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Translated by **Sirajudheen P**

Though Islam does not adopt any particular art form as part of its religious belief or observance, the community has assimilated local forms, rhythms, music and literary forms in their expressions. The article examines how Oppana, the dance that accompanies marriages, was evolved through years.

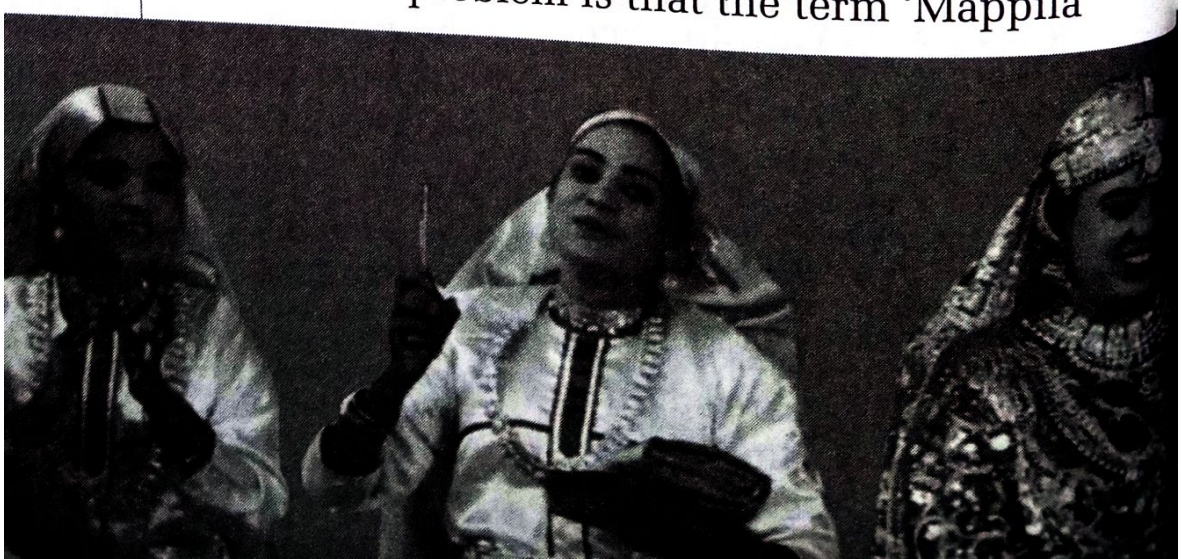
An analysis of hereditary factors and presentation structures of a community' art helps to analyze the culture and history of the community. This is the main advantage of folk wisdom. These studies will open the door for different communities to learn about each other's cultural offerings and the community's potential for cultural exchange. This essay focuses on some cultural analyses based on the folk art *Oppana* because of its rare stature as a female art and its popularity among the Muslim Mappila of Kerala. The study mainly looks at the power elements

in the tradition of *Oppana*. When analyzing a communal piece, it is important to consider the context of tradition in terms of the nature of its fellowship and its elements of popularity.

Folklore and its tradition

Its origin and tradition play an important role in defining art as folklore. The inherent problem of the Folklore Study Project is that the factor of pragmatism has not yet been definitively defined and regulated (Folklore: 129). Generally, what passed down through generations is called tradition. It's not certain to say that a piece of information of how many generations have passed is considered a tradition. It is natural that the arts of the most deserving sections of the various communities of a region will be recognized as old. Meanwhile attempts to mark the unique manifestations of the weaker communities on the margins of the common society are rare. This is why it is not easy to determine the status of an art of minority community such as *Oppana*. We cannot but depend upon the recorded history of *Oppana* which was presented in the form being introduced today. Not only *Oppana* but all the *Mappila* arts like *Kolkkali*, *Dufmutt* and *Arabanamutt* have to face this crisis.

The second problem is that the term 'Mappila



art' cannot be understood as we do with Hindu art, Dalit art or Christian art. The main reason is that, like the art of other religions, the Mappila arts have no religious ritual or expression level. Islam, the religion of the Mappila, does not adopt any particular art form as part of its religious belief or observance. However, every Muslim community has assimilated local forms, rhythms, music and literary forms in their expressions. There are a number of artistic traditions in and around the Muslim community that are not seen as anti-religious, as long as they violate the basic laws of religion. The age in which *Mappilas* arrived in Kerala is a matter of great disagreement for historians. Even if the Mappilas were formed as an active community in Kerala, it is certain that there would be some artistic activity among them since then. Without this, no community can survive for centuries. The notion that Kerala has a 'common heritage' and that the *Mappilas* are not inherited from it is a subordinate common sense construct. The general notion that common Kerala art is what remains after the doctrines of *Mappila* art, Christian art, Dalit art, and tribal art are omitted is still strong today. One can only speak of the tradition of the Mappila arts by overcoming or denying that common ground.

The third issue is the question of what popular art is. Artistic aspects of rituals prevalent among Kerala Muslims such as *Quttarathib*, the *Rakhs* which is known as the Sufi dance and the *Samaa* performed by some *Thwareeqath* group etc. cannot be classified as popular representational art. Since not all Muslims in Kerala are Mappilas, not all Kerala Muslim arts are Mappila arts. There are arts in



Kerala too which are common to Muslims and exclusive to Mappilas. It's also noteworthy that the traditions of the Muslims of South Kerala, such as *Rammadi*, are not generally regarded as artistic traditions of Muslims in Kerala. The most popular *Mappila* arts are *Oppana*, *Dufmutt*, and *Kolkkali*. Though these are considered the traditional art of Kerala Muslims, the issue of 'which tradition' is always active. It's pertinent to wonder why the Muslims of South Kerala did not have a unique and pure style of art.

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Many of the traditional art forms of Kerala are kept alive today by various competitions. When they are introduced as a competitive item, the elements of the traditions need to be clearly articulated. This is because, while determining the winner in conjunction with tradition has become a key requirement or consideration. These competing conditions also limit the diversity and innovation of traditional art to some extent. It is true that it was due to the influence of competitive platform the *Chavittukali* and *Parichmuttukali*, which are being presented with a wide variety of disciplines by various Dalit sects, were stuck with single role and step. What are these terms set for the Mappila arts, who suggested and whether they were the original tradition is another issue in this regard.

Given such facts as background, one can analyze the elements of the *Mappila* tradition of *Oppana*. The elements of costume and text are important in the *Oppana* as it is an important art of dance without acting. This article only analyzes the elements of tradition in costume pattern.

Traditional art of Oppana

The word *Oppana* means likeness, compari-

son, harmony, charm, ornament, but in this sense no one is using the term *Oppana*. The words like *Oppam, Oppa-ram* etc. are used to mean *with* and *together*. *Oppana* is also the name of a peculiar music in *Mappilappattu*. This *isal* (music) was popularized from an ancient authentic Mappila art even before the creation of *Oppana* as an art form. So there cannot be direct bond between the Oppana and the *isal* today. This is now known as the *Oppana Murukkam*. This is the imitation of the Arabic tune *madid*. The famous *Oppana* song '*Thashrifu-mubarakkadara-vaya nabiyum'mattimarkk*...is in this tune (Encyclopaedia of Islam: 7 - 238). It is said that Moinkutty Vaidyar was present at the convention of the ascension of Arakkal Ali Raja (Habib Sultan) of Kannur and it is also said that he performed *Oppana chayal, murukkam* etc. after the *Kolkkali* performance. It is only after 1945 that the hand-knit concert was named as *Oppana* (Islamic Encyclopaedia 7: 236). A style of singing, known as wedding songs, *vattappattukal*, and *mukhthalappattukal*, later became known as *Oppana*. There had no proper costume for this art form that was only sung sitting in the round. This group song was only sung by middle-aged married women. *Oppana* was performed on the celebrations were held on the occasion of wedding, circumcision, hairdressing ceremony (the first ceremony of removing the hair of children) and the forties (the feast that lasts forty days after childbirth). *Oppana* on the wedding occasions were presented by men. Only in the male Oppana there had the routine of the bridegroom sitting in the centre. In the interior of the house there were female *Oppana* performed with women only spectators.

There were people who clapped and not clapped for the song. Though the song is *halal* (permissible), a discussion on whether clapping is religiously permissible remains a matter of debate among religious scholars. This caused huge disagreements. In the popular praise song of *Baith,* among *hadhrami* and *shadhuli* streams *hadhrami* doesn't use rhythm but *shadhuli* does. *Hadhrami baith* was also called *Koyilandi baith*. This difference should have made

the religious debate about the possibility of clapping in the male *Oppana*.

However, the Mappilas of Kuttichira of Kozhikkode had a great dispute and there arose a community divide in which even their mutual intermarriages were forbidden. Those who held the opinion on the need of hand rhythm and those who don't were known as *muttullavar* (those who have hand rhythm) and *muttillaathavar* (those who don't have hand rhythm) respectively. The lesson of the controversy is that Islamic prohibitions are associated not only with the presentation of art but also with the very life of the Muslim.

It was after 1935 that the older women's *Kai-muttikkali* (clapping) has been redesigned to match the current style of *Oppana*. It was held with the wedding of a girl at *Nalakath* family in Kozhikode (History of Muslim in Kozhikkode- 280). Obviously this presentation has generated much criticism among the Muslim community. But because it was popularly accepted as an art form it was imitated in many weddings. In the popular culture of Mappila, the popular culture has always been in the process of defying religious scholarly taboos. Likewise, caroms, football, cinema, story-telling, drama, social media, women's dressing style, and wedding concerts have all been criticized and subsequently adopted.

The girls' *Oppana* was first made public on June 24, 1964. It was eight girls from Kuttichira, Kozhikkode who presented this event at the state carnival of the *All Kerala Balajanasakhyam* under the aegis of *Malayala Manorama* at V.J.T hall, Ernakulam (History of Muslims in Kozhikkode- 280). The girls appeared to the venue dressed in their usual skirts, frock and scarf. It was the first

Oppana which the bride was seated at the centre. With the support of the newspapers and realizing its popularity, a professional *Oppana* team was formed in Kozhikkode. The leader of the group K.M.K Vellayil is the artist who created the basic style of Oppana's costumes today. As an art formed by the girls with the support of artist men at Kuttichira, Kozhikkode, the dress worn by females on special occasions in Kozhikkode has been widely recognized as the public attire of *Oppana* even now. It is interesting to note that *Oppana*, that originated at Kuttichira, Kozhikkode 60 years ago, is being considered as the traditional art of Mappila Muslims.

Oppana's attire and tradition

The arts are an organized form of communication and symbolism of the non-verbal language. What a community wears during their artistic expression, like other elements of their art, is largely related to the belief system and the consciousness of the universe. The role of attire in an artistic performance is working as the subset of the body of the performer. *Kathakali* will make this fact clearer. Therefore the attire which causes limiting or preventing body movements that are part of art is not good in any presentation. The variation in the style of *Kolkkali* and *Dufmutt* depended on the nature of cast and discipline of the art. The attire and the body movements in an artist expression are associated with the meaning of the art presented. To convey this sense of possibility is to wear a checked *dhoti* and tight vest for the martial art of *Mappila- Kolkkali*, and pure white dresses for the prayer like *Dufmutt*. Apart from the basic objectives of the garment such as hiding the nakedness, covering the body from the nature, and enhancing the beauty, there is also another aim of providing pleasure to the spectators in art.

The attire in the *Mappila* arts is considered the traditional attire of the previous generation of community members. And those attires are not as good today. Any community member now thinks that it is inadequate or disruptive to reform because it is old fashioned. It's noteworthy that the things which are considered a part of the tradition like the

Konthala (corner of *dhoti* projected out), the girdle of the scarf, the oldest of the ornaments, the front line of the female's bodice, the *kacchi* under the *dhoti* known as *Kasavu Kara*, the green belt, the tail of the turban, long chain the neck of groom, and the checked *dhoti* of the *Kolkkali* are not found as fashionable among the attires of Mappilas today. Tradition then becomes, in other words, outside the general acceptance of contemporary fellowship. If a girl arrives dressed up in *Oppana* attire to a campus will be regarded as a joke or a specialty.

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The direct authority of religious faith is evident in every layer of the Mappila arts. This religiousness is more evident in the Mappila arts than it is in the traditional art of any other community, as is evident in any other discourse for the Muslim community. It is true that the Mappila arts have not turned away from the dress code that Islam defines. The reforms in the costume of art were also confined to these religious terms. It was in 1990s the white *kacchi* for *Oppana* became mandatory. Various *dhotis* in names of *mathavu, kacchi, kasavu* cloth, green Silk and dotted *dhoti* were worn by the ancient female singers. There were also local variations in its colour.

There is no doubt that the dress worn by *Oppana* and *Kolkkali* in the early days was typical of Muslim men and women of the time. Even the vest worn in *Kolkkali* called *kanjiprakk* is added later on. The common attire of Kerala Muslims during the advent of Muslims is to wear dotted cloth, striped cloth and shirt. This much cloth is a luxury when it was customary for both men and women to wear only one piece of clothing that was

not worn over the waist and lower back. According to the copies of the dots on females' *dhotis*, there were even different names like spot in check, *aamadappulli*. It shows the variety in colour and design in general attire. Women in wealthy households use *kasavu* in ordinary attire and others use in celebratory occasions. It's called *Mathavu*. The women wore colour bordered white *kacchi* and *kasavu* bordered black cloth called *soop* (Kerala Muslim History Congress essay Collection-550). P.K Mohammed Kunhi observes that the tight jacket and lower *dhoti* worn by women on special occasions were a dress that was not in fashion for the Muslim woman at that time in India.

The ornamental attire of the Muslim woman is mentioned in the *Oppana* songs. According to the commands in the *Oppana* song, the bride is the *Hoory* on Earth and the *Hoories* are the brides of Heaven.

Veeviyar puthukanni chamanja vartha
Visthara pukalcha kondiniyum neerthaa
Neerthuvathokke hareerine chutti
Chaarthi va makkanayum shirassetti
Shirassetti chamanjulla kulali kaathil
Chinkarappira chuttum alikkatthali
Alliyalikkila kaathila randum
Alloru chempaka poovathilund
Illimudikkoru poorana chend
Chendulla mudi poov thalakk thajum
Cherchayil mudi valakkidayil thaajum.

(News about the bride dressed in new clothes
Could be proceeded further with explanation,
All she was wearing was silk
With a headscarf on her head,
Bride has worn jingling earrings,
Which has flower designs.
Flowers are decorated on the hair
Which are like adorned with a crown,



And the head matches well with the crown.)

(Chettuvayil Pareekkutti Haji- Saadath Beevi)

In a nutshell, men are the ones who created, arranged, and designed the *Oppana* we see today, just like any other traditional art. The girls were mere performers. There are only two women in the names (Pokkar Master, B. Muhammed Master, Panthakkalakath Mammad Koya, Puthiyakamakkantakath Muhammed Abdurahiman alias Amman, Ojjeentakath Basheer, Valiyakath Rasheed, Chembukandi Shamsudheen, Kamakkantakath Alikkoya, K.M.K Vellayil, P.N.M Alikkoya, U.V Muhammedali, and K.C Chelavoor) of those who organized it for the first time. They were Ojjeentakath Imbichaayishabi and Puthiyanalakath Maliyekkal Aayishabi.

Upon the arrival of *Oppana* into cinema as part of modern popular culture, its style changed to a more male gaze. P. Bhaskaran, Raghavan Master and Babu Raj introduced *Oppana* to cinema. Thereby the glittering garments and the shimmering dancers transformed *Oppana* into a popular art form. *Oppana* as an art was determined by the camera same as any other art. Since the appearance of *Oppana* performers in the film is also dependent on the female body, the attire of *Oppana* in the film has also influenced the stage *Oppana* as

it's an imitation. With this, the underwear of the *Oppana* performers became an integral part of the attire. That is how it became mandatory for girls to wear breast masks during *Oppana* performance.

Conclusion

In short, the Mappila Muslim Woman's Art of *Oppana* is not an out-dated art form. It has been subjected to a great deal of external influence in the Muslim traditional arts. It is evident that gender and national structures of power have played a role in the design and attire of the *Oppana* being presented today. In determining the role of *Oppana*, there has been mainly the dominance of religion and men. Though the film and the stage made *Oppana* popular, but most of them lacked female authorship. Traditional post-modernist revivals have made *Oppana* a re-enactment of old female identity roles in *kacchi* and plain cloth. The insight offered by postmodern folklore studies is that women's *Oppana* was made in rooms that are not accessible to women. The subtext is that this is what happened and happens in any traditional art form presented by women alone.

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