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## 'Mappila': Identity and semantic narrowing

Joseph Koyippally Joseph

**Abstract:-** Mappila, the generic name for the Kerala-settled West Asian diaspora which gradually got integrated with the indigenous community, has undergone semantic narrowing to mean the Muslims of North Kerala (Illias 436 fn. 4) since the twentieth century. However, neither all Muslims of North Kerala are Mappilas nor is North Kerala the only place of Muslim Mappilas. Moreover, there are also non-Muslim Mappilas in Kerala. The West Asian trade settlements which came up in the southern, central, and northern Kerala established communities in those regions through marital alliances with the local community, and are qualified by words referring to their religious affiliations such as 'Jewish' (*Yuda Mappila*), 'Christian' (*Nasrani Mappila*) and 'Muslim' (*Jonaka Mappila*) (Malieckal 300; Županov 99). The meaning of the term got narrowed as Muslim Mappilas began asserting their identity due to political reasons that threatened their existence.

Etymological explanation of the word 'Mappila' is sociologically illuminating. The meaning of the word, a combination of *ma* and *pillai* (Logan 191; Mayaram, Pandian and Skaria; Miller, Mappila 30-32; K. P. Menon 534-37; Thurston 458; Miller, Encyclopaedia VI.45), is not yet satisfactorily explained. Although *pillai* ['son'] is generally accepted as a term of endearment and intimacy, an honorific title, and a title of Nairs, the meaning of *mais* is debated. *Ma* has different meanings in the source languages of Malayalam. In Sanskrit, its meanings could be 'mother' ['mother's son'] or 'great' as abbreviation of *maha* ['great son'], and 'not' ['not son' i.e., 'son in law', probably a foreigner in matrilineal Kerala]. In the first sense, Mappila is a child born to Arab fathers in local costal woman, as mother, *ma*, was to take care of the child, *pillai*, as the fathers never claimed for the children (Day, 1863: 366). As a title of honour it was used by the Nayars and Christians in Travancore and probably by the early Muslim immigrants (Logan, 1951: 191). The Dravidian word *Mappila* means bridegroom (Moore, 1870: 13), who to the community of the bride is 'not son', but an endeared one. Tamil retains this sense and it connotes a marital relation, and got to mean the descendants of west Asian traders who married local women (Miller, Hindu-Christian Dialogue 50). It was extended to the locals who accepted customs of the migrants. The editor of *The Travels of Ludovico d' Varthoma* regards *mappila* as a derivation of the Arabic colloquial *ma fellah* [not farmer]. It highlights the west Asians occupation as trading as different from agriculture (Badger 1890: 123).

The term also has religious connotations. The word, as a corruption of *marga pillai* could be derived from Sanskrit and Pali in which *marga* meant 'path' or Buddhism which was founded on the eight-fold path (*ashtangamarga*) and the popular faith in Kerala before 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. Those who joined the new *marga* ['way'] were derisively called *marga vasi*, even after the arrival of Western missionaries in the sixteenth century. It is also said that *mappila* is derived from *mahapillai* ['distinguished Pillai'], a distinguishing title meant to integrate the west Asian traders into the caste-ordered Hindu society of Kerala. Caste—a birth-bestowed categorization of people into different occupational classes and associated privileges—was a socio-political necessity in Kerala, since the advent of the Brahmins in Kerala in the eighth century. As understood from *Keralaopathi*, the Brahminical migration was a part of the Hindu assertion against the Buddhist and the Jain egalitarian social order, which was by then popular in Kerala (Alexander). As the Brahmin missionaries ended Buddhist supremacy and enforced Brahminical social order, they had to coopt local ruling class as Kshatriyas, the pliable locals as Sudras, and brand the rebels as outcastes. As they had annihilated the Buddhist and Jain trading class, they were forced to bestow the Vaishya status to the Asian traders even as they were kept them away from power. Even as the West Asian merchants who needed more operational space in the host-land, pragmatic local traders might have the religion of the less oppressive West Asian traders as means to outmaneuver persecution. This view is strengthened by the use of *palli*, the Pali word for Buddhist place of worship for Christian and Muslim places of worship; the local beliefs like "*Kailasa vasthukkal asuddhamayal, Paulosu thottal athu shudhamakum*" ["Paul's touch depollutes temple wares"]; the practice of having Christian families living near major temples to touch and cleanse the oil brought to the temple by low-caste oil-producers (Varghese K 898); and localized Christian and Muslim collaboration with temple festivals etc. Yet another Christian interpretation is that it was derived from *ma-palli* (mother church). The Jewish traders or *Yuda Mappila* of Kerala were classified after their settlements at Kadavumbagam, Thekkumbhagam, Parur, Chendamangalam, and Mala. This small community, which never insisted on the title, was called nevertheless as Mappila. As they