



Matriarchs of Malabar: A Cultural Study of The Matrilineal Legacy of The Muslim Community In Kuttichira

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Abstract:

Kuttichira is a historically significant area in Calicut, Kerala. It is known for its unique cultural identity and the practice of matrilineality, in which family lineage and property are traced through women. This study investigates the origins, characteristics, and transformations of the matrilineal system among the Muslim community in Kuttichira. Using qualitative and anthropological methods, including six interviews with inhabitants and researchers of the specific area, as well as archival research in local records, this research examines family structures, gender roles, property management, and the leadership functions of the eldest female in the family. She is locally known as the Karanothi. The study also analyzes the influence of architectural design and patterns in traditional joint-family homes on social organization. The findings reveal that matrilineal and matrilocal systems historically conferred authority and responsibility upon women. She played a central role in family welfare, education, and health, while husbands had limited property rights. These practices varied across each *Tharawad*. Over time, modernization, socio-economic changes, and legal reforms have transformed these traditions, leading to altered inheritance patterns and family dynamics. This study contributes to an understanding of the historical and cultural evolution of matrilineal practices within Kerala's Muslim communities and highlights the impact of female-centered family structures on social organization.

Keywords: Kuttichira, Matrilineal System, Matrilocal, Karanothi, Modernization

INTRODUCTION

The term *matriarch* refers to a woman who leads the household, manages property, and transmits lineage and identity, even within religious traditions that are formally patriarchal. Among the Muslims of Kuttichira in Calicut, Kerala, a distinct matrilineal tradition called *Marumakkathayam* is followed, in which family inheritance and descent are traced through the mother's line.¹ The matrilineal system in Muslim families of Kuttichira is an adaptation of Kerala's *Marumakkathayam* tradition, originating from historical trade and cultural exchanges along the Indian Ocean.² While matrilineal practices have appeared among coastal Muslim groups in South and Southeast Asia, such arrangements are generally rare globally within Muslim societies,³ which are predominantly patrilineal in kinship and inheritance patterns making the case of Kuttichira particularly noteworthy in comparative Islamic anthropology. Studies of the Koyas and other Indian Ocean coastal groups highlight the

¹ Devi and Street, *Marumakkathayam System*, p 681.

² M. P. et al., "Potentials of Revitalizing the Industrial Heritage of Kuttichira to Infuse a Sense of History in Calicut, India," p 46.

³ Muhammed Shammas, "Revolutionary Kinship," para. para 4.

uncommon nature of Muslim matriliney compared to broader global patterns of patrilineality.

The residents of Kuttichira, locally known as *Koyas*, secured their social and economic positions through maritime trade and established strong connections centuries ago. Scholars have proposed two main hypotheses regarding the origins of the matrilineal system among the Muslims of Kuttichira. One view holds that interactions between Arab traders and local women contributed to the emergence of matrilineal practices Arab merchants who came to Calicut for trade often married or formed alliances with local women.⁴ Their offspring integrated into the community, potentially reinforcing matrilineal traditions common in the region's kinship systems. Historical studies of Malabar note such intermarriage and cultural blending as part of early Islamic transmission along the coast.⁵

Another perspective emphasizes internal cultural continuity through conversion, as local *Nair* families adopted Islam and later retained their pre-existing matrilineal *Marumakkathayam* customs.⁶ In the *Nair* community, women were expected to assume leadership roles due to the men's continuous participation in military training and warfare.⁷ This dynamic resulted in Muslim communities that continued matrilineal inheritance and residence patterns. Several historical analyses argue that conversion, rather than foreign marriage alone, explains the persistence of matriliney among North Malabar Muslims.⁸ Both hypotheses are supported by different strands of archival and ethnographic research, and it is likely that a combination of trade contact, intermarriage, and local cultural retention contributed to the distinctive matrilineal practices of Kuttichira's Muslim community.

Historically, the local ruler, the Zamorin of Calicut, actively supported and encouraged Muslim settlements and alliances with local families, contributing to the social prominence of Kuttichira's Muslim community and the reinforcement of matrilineal practices.⁹ Evidence for this is found in archival records of royal grants, historical chronicles of Malabar trade, and colonial accounts documenting the settlement patterns of Arab and local Muslim families. In the *Marumakkathayam* system, women are custodians of lineage and property. The eldest female, known locally as the *Karanothi*, traditionally exercises authority over family affairs and asset management. The traditional ancestral house, or *Tharawad*, is large and architecturally distinctive, featuring grand gateways, spacious courtyards, and multiple rooms designed to accommodate extended family units. Architectural surveys, historical photographs, and oral histories from Kuttichira families serve as primary and secondary sources substantiating these observations. Together, these sources highlight the interplay between political support from the Zamorin, local architectural form, and matrilineal social organization in sustaining the community's unique inheritance and leadership structures.

Matrilocal residence is a defining feature of Kuttichira's Muslim communities after marriage, men often live in their wives' homes, and in many traditional *tharawads*, husbands generally do not hold rights over ancestral property. The matrilineal system has historically

⁴ Deccan Her., "The Moplahs of Malabar," para. 2.

⁵ Islam Kerala Kerala Tour., "Origin of the Muslim Community in Kerala | Arab Influence | Cultural Roots | Mappila | Arab Trade | Marriage | Malabar Coast |," para. 1.

⁶ Farook and Haskerali, "Appropriated Islam," p 270.

⁷ Dixit, "Kerala's Marumakkathayam," p1.

⁸ Farook and Haskerali, "Appropriated Islam," p 270.

⁹ Sahapedia, "The Mosques of Kuttichira," p 12.

afforded women significant authority and status within both family and society, along with responsibility for family welfare, education, and health.¹⁰ Ethnographic research among the *Koyas* of Kuttichira confirms that while these patterns were widespread, there were variations between *tharawads* and changes over time due to socio-economic factors, modernization, and legal reforms. Fieldwork and numerous interviews were conducted with members of different *tharawads*. These observations underscore the importance of considering both historical continuity and local variation when analyzing matrilineal practices in this community.

Most popular histories of Muslims in Kerala focus on trade, reform movements, or mosques, but rarely highlight the matrilineal legacy and women's central role in family and community life.¹¹ Key historical accounts, such as *Koyikotte Muslingalude Charithram* (History of the Muslim Community in Kozhikode) and K. Balakrishnakurupp's *History of Kozhikode*, provide critical perspectives on the development of the community, the roles of rulers such as the Zamorin, the impact of external invasions, and the evolution of religious and family customs.

By exploring these aspects, the article aims to illuminate the history and distinctive matrilineal environment of Kuttichira, highlighting Arab-local marriages, family structures, and the evolving status of women. This study fills a gap in the literature by centering women's lived experiences within Kuttichira's matrilineal system and linking archival and historical sources with contemporary transformations, thereby providing an integrated perspective on continuity and change. The discussion offers insights valuable both to residents and to a global audience interested in Kerala's social history, demonstrating how matriliney has shaped family governance, gender roles, and socio-cultural adaptation over time.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore matrilineal social structures within the Muslim community of *Kuttichira*, focusing on real-life experiences and the transformation of traditional systems over time. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of three months in *Kuttichira* using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. A total of thirteen informants were selected, including elderly matriarchs, women inheritors, male family members, and community leaders, chosen based on age, lineage position, and direct experience with matrilineal practices. Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with thirteen participants, allowing flexibility to capture oral histories, inheritance practices, and gendered family roles. In addition, three group discussions were conducted with community members to elicit collective memories and shared interpretations of matrilineal traditions. Participant observation of family gatherings, religious events, and communal rituals was carried out to understand everyday practices and social interactions related to matriliney. Secondary data included archival sources, such as legal documents, property records, inheritance deeds, and historical texts related to the *Kuttichira* Muslim community. These documents were cross-checked with oral testimonies to ensure historical accuracy and contextual depth.

¹⁰ Cleetus, "Education and Womens Identity," p 92.

¹¹ Lakshmi, "The Malabar Muslims," p 34.

Data analysis followed a thematic coding process. Interview transcripts and field notes were first subjected to open coding to identify recurring concepts related to inheritance, authority, kinship, and gender roles. These codes were then grouped into broader themes through axial coding, enabling comparison across generations and family structures. Narrative analysis was employed to reconstruct family histories and trace changes in matrilineal practices over time. Comparative analysis with other documented matrilineal communities was used to situate *Kuttichira* within a wider socio-cultural context. Methodological triangulation was achieved by integrating interview data, observations, focus group discussions, and archival records. Member checking was conducted by sharing key interpretations with selected participants to validate findings and minimize researcher. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the anonymity of participants. By combining multiple qualitative methods and validation strategies, this study provides a deep understanding of matrilineal legacies and their contemporary transformations within the Muslim community of *Kuttichira*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity: Hybrid Inheritance Practices in Kuttichira's Matrilineal Muslim Households

Calicut was one of the key ports in Indian Ocean trade. It attracted traders from different countries, especially Arabia. These interactions facilitated the settlement of Arab merchants in Calicut and allied ports. Inter-marriage with local women contributed significantly to the emergence of the Mappila Muslim community. This distinct cultural group combined Arab and Kerala influences. Recent historical studies affirm that this diaspora of Arab merchants and their families played a foundational role in forming the region's commercial and social networks, which evolved into enduring community structures.¹²

Kuttichira, one of Calicut's oldest Muslim quarters, grew from these mercantile roots into a heritage-rich neighbourhood where architecture, kinship practices, and community life still reflect centuries-old exchanges between settlers and local society. According to official Kerala tourism heritage information, "Kuttichira's history is deeply intertwined with the arrival of Arab traders along the Malabar Coast, creating a thriving Muslim community that became a cultural and commercial focal point of the city."¹³ In the medieval period, Calicut port's prosperity was closely tied to the patronage of the Zamorins, the ruling dynasty of the region. They welcomed and protected foreign traders and facilitated a cosmopolitan environment until European intervention disrupted these dynamics. On the medieval period, Calicut port's prosperity was closely tied to the patronage of the Zamorins. It was the ruling dynasty of the region. He welcomed and protected foreign traders and facilitated a cosmopolitan environment until European intervention disrupted these dynamics.¹⁴

The matrilineal system practiced among the Muslim community of Kuttichira cannot be understood merely as a cultural anomaly, but as a historically embedded social structure

¹² Islam Kerala Kerala Tour., "Origin of the Muslim Community in Kerala | Arab Influence | Cultural Roots | Mappila | Arab Trade | Marriage | Malabar Coast |," para. 2.

¹³ *Home Page - Kuttichira*, para. 1.

¹⁴ Neelakandan Girija, "Stories of Resistance and Resilience," p 735.

shaped by early Arab maritime trade, local kinship systems and gendered negotiations of power. While earlier studies emphasize the role of Arab traders in the formation of the Mappila community.¹⁵ But the present research extends this scholarship by showing how these historical encounters continue to influence contemporary inheritance practices, family organization and women's authority in Kuttichira.

Interview data from elderly matriarchs and senior family members consistently highlight that prolonged stays of Arab traders in Calicut and its surrounding areas, including Kuttichira, created domestic arrangements in which women assumed central roles in household continuity and property management. Oral narratives indicate that Arab men, who often remained in trade, relied on local women's households for social stability. This pattern aligns with anthropological theories of matriliney that link women-centred inheritance to male mobility and maritime economies. Thus, matrilineality in Kuttichira emerged not simply as a local custom, but as a pragmatic adaptation to transregional trade networks.

Matriliney among Kuttichira Muslims functioned as a mechanism of social cohesion and economic security. Property transmission through women ensured continuity of lineage and residence within the natal home, a pattern repeatedly emphasized in interview narratives and supported by archival property records. This finding corroborates earlier historical research on Malabar matriliney, while offering new empirical evidence from Muslim households an area underexplored in existing literature, which has largely focused on Hindu matrilineal communities. At the same time, the data point to significant transformations in matrilineal practices in the contemporary period. Younger participants and women inheritors described a gradual shift toward Islamic inheritance norms and nuclear family arrangements, influenced by legal reforms, religious reinterpretations and modern education. However, these changes are uneven. While formal inheritance may increasingly follow patrilineal lines, everyday authority over domestic space and caregiving continues to be exercised by senior women. This finding complicates binary assumptions of "decline" or "persistence" of matriliney, instead revealing hybrid practices shaped by both tradition and modernity.¹⁶

Origin of the Matrilineal System

Arabs have been active traders since ancient times, largely due to the geographical and climatic conditions of their homeland, which were not suitable for agriculture. As a result, they relied heavily on trade and seafaring as their primary means of livelihood. Their extensive knowledge of geography and navigation enabled them to become prominent travelers and merchants across the Indian Ocean region, including the Malabar Coast.

Numerous local records demonstrate long-standing patterns of contact and exchange between Arab traders and the Malabar region. Historical documentation relies significantly on early manuscripts and local chronicles. One important source is *Qissat Shakrawarti Farmad*, an Arabic manuscript currently preserved in the British Library. This text traces early maritime connections and cultural exchanges along the Malabar Coast.

Specific evidence of intermarriage can be found in the historical research conducted by P. P. Mammed Koya in 2012. His study indicates that the Zamorin permitted many Arab traders to marry local women. Records suggest that more than 400 women were given in

¹⁵ M, "Early Arab Trade with India," p 3.

¹⁶ Ponmulathodi, "Maritime and Trade Experiences of the Muslims under Zamorins of Calicut (14th – 16th Centuries A.D.)," p 1.

marriage to Arab traders under the patronage of the Zamorin.¹⁷ Furthermore, studies of family and house names in Kuttichira reveal Arab, Persian, and African lineage influences embedded within local kinship structures. Examples of such house names include *Sufika Veettil* (House of Sufi), *Jifrintakam* (House of Jifri), and *Qadiyarakam* (House of Qadi). These names provide indirect evidence of long-term integration and intermarriage over generations.¹⁸

Regarding the origin of the matrilineal system in Kuttichira, many historians argue that it emerged as a result of marriage alliances between Arab traders and local women. Since Arab traders often stayed for several months, they commonly resided in their wives' homes and gradually adopted local customs, including the matrilineal system already practiced by the Nayar community in Kerala. Over time, this system became deeply embedded within the Muslim community of Kuttichira.¹⁹

Another perspective proposed by historians links the adoption and persistence of matrilineal practices among Muslims in Kuttichira and the broader Malabar region to the political patronage of the Zamorin of Calicut and the socio-religious processes accompanying conversion to Islam. Scholars of Mappila history note that the Zamorin maintained close relations with Muslim traders and actively supported the spread of Islam among local populations as part of broader political and economic strategies.

According to historical accounts, the Zamorin issued orders encouraging members of certain fishing families and lower-caste communities to be raised as Muslims. This policy was intended to strengthen naval manpower and consolidate support for his maritime trade interests.²⁰ Such patronage, along with the social mobility associated with conversion, became an important factor in the growth of the Muslim population in Malabar and contributed to various forms of cultural adaptation.

Anthropological and historical studies further indicate that Muslim converts from local communities, including groups with matrilineal traditions such as the Nairs and certain fishing communities continued to observe their pre-existing social practices even after converting to Islam. As a result, matrilineal inheritance patterns persisted for several generations following conversion.²¹ This continuity reflects a complex interaction between indigenous kinship systems and Islamic norms, rather than a straightforward shift to patrilineal frameworks.²²

By situating conversion within the broader political economy of Zamorin rule and recognizing the hybrid nature of social change in Malabar, this perspective helps explain why matrilineal practices continued to be observed among certain Muslim families in Kuttichira, even as Islamic legal norms gradually became more influential over time.

Tharawad System

The *Tharawad* system in Kuttichira represents a unique blend of Mappila Muslim and

¹⁷ P.P.Mammad Koya Parappil, *Kozhikotte Muslingalude Charithram*, P 68.

¹⁸ "Marriages and Cosmopolitanism in Kozhikode," para. 3.

¹⁹ Aslam, "Political Economy of Zamorin and Religious Conversion to Islam," para. 6.

²⁰ "Socio-Economic-Determinants-of-the-Continuity-of-Matrilocal-Family-System-among-Mappila-Muslims-of-Malabar.Pdf," 69.

²¹ Kooria, "An Abode of Islam under a Hindu King," p 91.

²² "Malabar Muslims," pt. 5.

local *Nair* architectural styles, reflecting a tradition of matrilineal inheritance and communal living. The inhabitants of Kuttichira traditionally lived in large ancestral houses known as *Tharawads*,²³ which were central to their social and cultural life. These *Tharawads* were characterized by a matrilineal system of inheritance, in which property rights were passed down through the female line. They often accommodated up to 150 members at a time and included multiple kitchens and numerous rooms to house different family units within the extended household.²⁴



Picture 1. *Tharawad* in Kuttichira



Picture 2. *Varanda (Kolayi)*

Features of *Tharawad*

The spatial arrangement of a *Tharawad*, including elements such as the *padippura*, *kolayi*, *padappuram*, *nadokam*, and *nalakayyi*, is widely discussed in studies on Kerala's vernacular architecture and the social organization of Muslim families in Calicut.²⁵

The entrance of the *Tharawad* begins at the *padippura* (gateway pavilion), which marks the transition between the public street and the semi-private domestic compound. This space leads to the *kolayi* (front veranda), a semi-public reception area where visitors especially male guests are received. From the *kolayi*, one enters the *padappuram* (formal hall), which is used as a space for communal gatherings such as ceremonies and family meetings. The spatial hierarchy becomes increasingly private toward the *nadokam* (central hall), which functions as the core residential area. It contains multiple family rooms as well as vertical

²³ Neelakandan, "A House Reminisces 400 Years of Its History," para. 1.

²⁴ Krishnakumar, *Conservation of Kuttichira, Kozhikode (India) - A Mappila Muslim Settlement*, p 31.

²⁵ Saha, "A Study of Spatial Arrangement | PDF | Art," p 3.

circulation elements connecting different floors.

At the center of the *nadokam* is the *nalakayyi* (central open courtyard), which provides natural light, ventilation, and rainwater drainage, while also serving important ritual and domestic functions. The presence of approximately 25-30 bedrooms in larger *Tharawads* reflects the joint-family system, with each room representing a sub-family unit. The *maniyara* (bridal chamber), typically located on the upper floor, symbolizes marital status and is arranged according to the bride's family's socio-economic position. Similarly, the presence of six to eight separate kitchens indicates the relative autonomy of sub-families within the larger matrilineal household. Overall, the spatial progression from the *padippura* (public threshold) to the *nalakayyi* and the inner rooms (private familial domain) demonstrates a clear correlation between social hierarchy and spatial organization within the *Tharawad*.

Architectural Components of the *Tharawad*

Term (Transliteration)	Architectural Function	Social/Spatial Category
<i>Padippura</i>	Gateway structure marking entrance to compound	Public
<i>Kolayi</i>	Veranda used for receiving visitors	Semi-public
<i>Padappuram</i>	Formal hall for gatherings and ceremonies	Communal
<i>Nadokam</i>	Central residential hall with rooms and staircases	Semi-private
<i>Nalakayyi</i>	Open courtyard providing light and ventilation	Climatic core
<i>Maniyara</i>	Bridal chamber on upper floor	Private

Family Structure in Kuttichira

Although marriage in Islamic law is generally virilocal, in Kuttichira it effectively became matrilineal. Women continued to live in their natal *tharawad*, while husbands either visited or moved into the wife's household without gaining ownership rights there. Unlike other parts of Calicut, the inhabitants of Kuttichira practiced a matrilineal system.²⁶

Many people believe that this system benefits only women, however, this assumption is incorrect. In reality, both husbands and wives gain advantages from it. For women, one important benefit is that they can continue living in their own home even after marriage.²⁷ They do not need to move to and settle in their husband's household, which helps them maintain better relationships with their in-laws. Since the wife rarely visits her husband's family home, her in-laws tend to regard her as a guest and treat her accordingly.

At the same time, the husband holds a special position within his wife's family. He is known locally as *piyapla* or *puthiyapila* (new son). After the wedding, he is considered a member of his in-laws' household and is treated as an honored guest from shortly after the engagement until his death.²⁸ One informant from Kuttichira reported that:

“After marriage, my husband eats breakfast at my home every morning. My mother prepares special dishes for him, and my family treats him as one of their own sons.”

Over time, the husband develops a close bond with his in-laws and often refers to them

²⁶ Sebastian, “Matrilineal Practices Among Koyas of Kozhikode,” p 2.

²⁷ Narang, “RBSI - Essay,” p 1.

²⁸ P.K. Muhammed Kunhi, *Muslimingalum Kerala Samskaravum*, p 270.

as his own parents. Another informant, a resident of Kuttichira, described the practice today:

“These days, not all families strictly follow the custom. However, in more traditional households, the son-in-law still eats at his wife’s home every morning and takes part in domestic ceremonies.”

These accounts suggest that although the practice of *piyapla* has evolved over generations, it continues to remain an important ritual in certain households, reflecting the matrilineal social structure documented in ethnographic studies of the *Koyas* and other Muslim communities in Kerala.²⁹

Role of Women in the Matrilineal System

Women hold significant responsibilities in managing family affairs and household tasks within the matrilineal system.³⁰ Even after marriage, many women continue to live in their natal homes and take charge of domestic responsibilities. This arrangement is often regarded as a form of women’s empowerment, as it ensures that they are not neglected and can remain secure within their own households.³¹ Additionally, brothers frequently play a crucial role in supporting women in family-related matters.

Property rights between men and women are not uniform across *Tharawads*. In some households, only women possess rights to family property, which enhances their social status and authority. In other cases, property may be designated as *Waqf* (a charitable endowment) under specific conditions. For instance, in the *Kadiyarakam Tharawad* of Kuttichira, if there are no female members to inherit the property, it is converted into a *Waqf* in accordance with the regulations of the Kerala Muslim *Waqf* Board under the Kerala Muslim *Waqf* Act, 2005. This arrangement ensures that the female lineage can continue residing in the *Tharawad* in keeping with tradition.

Historically, as in other parts of Malabar, early marriage was common and often limited women’s opportunities to pursue higher education and employment. The legal framework governing the conversion of property into *Waqf* provides concrete evidence of how matrilineal property rights are preserved and regulated in the region.

Transformation of the Matriarchal System in Kuttichira

Today, the *Tharawad* system and many other aspects of the matrilineal structure are no longer practiced as they once were, due to various social and economic changes.³² The primary reasons for the transformation of the matrilineal system in Kuttichira are modernization and urbanization. The spread of education, especially among women in Kuttichira, has brought significant changes to this system.

In earlier times, the community’s main occupation was trade, particularly maritime trade with Arab merchants. However, following the decline of maritime commerce, many people shifted to other forms of employment to sustain their livelihoods, often seeking job opportunities outside their locality or even in Gulf countries. Gulf migration has significantly contributed to the transformation of the traditional system, as many families have gradually moved from joint family arrangements to nuclear family structures.

According to the Kerala Migration Survey (2023), approximately 2.2 million Keralites

²⁹ Dr. S.M. Muhammed Koya, *Malabarile Mappilamar*, p 82.

³⁰ P., “Matriliny and Domestic Morphology,” p 45.

³¹ Arunima, “Multiple Meanings,” p 210.

³² Roselin, “Kerala’s Shifting Landscape: The Decline of Matriliny and Its Implications,” p 2.

are emigrants living abroad. Although the Gulf region remains a major destination, the proportion of migrants moving to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries declined from 89.2% in 2018 to 80.5% in 2023. Meanwhile, remittances to Kerala more than doubled, increasing from ₹85,092 crore in 2018 to ₹216,893 crore in 2023.³³ These figures indicate a strong economic linkage between migration and transformations in family structures.

Gulf remittances have further accelerated urbanization, and gender roles have gradually shifted, with household responsibilities increasingly being shared with or assumed by men. Economic development has thus been a major factor in the transformation of the matriarchal system in Kuttichira.³⁴ Furthermore, recent studies on the Mappila community in Kerala demonstrate how Gulf migration has reshaped the socio-economic and educational structures within traditional family systems.³⁵

The structure and architectural features of the *Tharawad* have also undergone significant changes. In the past, extended families lived together in large ancestral houses accommodating between 100 and 150 members. However, with increasing economic stability and urbanization, nuclear families have become the preferred household structure, eliminating the need for such expansive residences.

Today, residents tend to build modern-style houses, and traditional *Tharawad* features such as *Padappuram*, *Kottil*, and *Nalakkayi* are rarely seen.³⁶ According to a recent survey on *Tharawad* architecture and traditions in Kuttichira, only 35% of the original *Tharawads* remain intact, while the rest have either been renovated, subdivided, or replaced with contemporary houses.

In the past, the community faced educational disadvantages, with most people receiving only primary education and having limited access to educational institutions. Today, however, both girls and boys are encouraged to pursue higher education. This transformation is clearly reflected among the inhabitants of Kuttichira across various spheres, including socio-economic and educational domains.



Picture 3. Traditional house in Kuttichira. Traditional *Tharawad* showing features like *Padappuram*, *Kottil*, and *Nalakkayi*. Accommodating a large joint family

³³ “The Kerala Migration Story.”

³⁴ Roselin, “Kerala’s Shifting Landscape: The Decline of Matriliney and Its Implications,” p 7.

³⁵ Jamia Millia Islamia Central University, New Delhi and Mk, “Gulf Migration and Socio-Economic Transformation of the Mappila Community in Kerala,” p 158.

³⁶ Krishnakumar, *Conservation of Kuttichira, Kozhikode (India) - A Mappila Muslim Settlement*, p 8.



Picture 4. New model house in Kuttichira. New model house reflecting nuclear-family preferences with modern architectural features.

CONCLUSION

The matrilineal system in Kuttichira represents a unique fusion of Kerala's traditional customs and Islamic influences, creating a distinctive social structure that empowered women, particularly through property rights, household authority, and leadership roles within the *Tharawad*. This study shows that marriage alliances between Arab traders and local women, supported by the Zamorin, contributed to the emergence of the matrilineal system. In such families, women maintained autonomy, managed family affairs, and ensured the continuity of lineage. Husbands were treated as guests in their wives' households, reinforcing communal cohesion and social stability. Over time, however, modernization, urbanization, Gulf migration, and rising levels of education have transformed family structures, gradually shifting them toward nuclear family arrangements.

This study highlights the cultural and social significance of the *Tharawad* system while noting that only a portion of traditional houses remain intact. It reflects the challenges of preserving heritage amid ongoing socio-economic change. To safeguard the matrilineal legacy of Kuttichira, it is recommended that oral histories and narratives of elderly matriarchs be systematically documented and archived, and that future research employ advanced quantitative methods to assess structural and demographic transformations within *Tharawads*.

Methodologically, this study is limited by its focus on a single neighborhood, a relatively small sample of 13 informants, and a reliance on qualitative data, which may not fully capture the diversity and variation within the wider Kuttichira community. Despite these limitations, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary relevance of matrilineality among Kuttichira Muslims and the socio-cultural mechanisms that have supported female-centered family governance.

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