

Preservation and Revitalization of Hybrid Scripts of Traditional Muslim Communities: A Study of Arabi-Malayalam

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Abstract

This study examines the preservation and revitalization of Arabi-Malayalam, a unique hybrid script combining Arabic script with the Malayalam language, historically used by the Mappila Muslim community in Malabar, Kerala, India. This research addresses the decline of Arabi-Malayalam due to sociocultural changes, educational reforms, and religious movements, highlighting its significance in maintaining cultural identity and heritage. Employing a qualitative, literature-based methodology, this study analyzes historical developments, cultural contexts, and comparative cases of endangered language preservation. It identifies the rich literary and scientific contributions of Arabi-Malayalam and the challenges posed by its diminishing use among the region's younger generations. This study proposes multifaceted strategies for revitalization, including community engagement, educational initiatives, technological integration, and institutional support, to ensure the script's continued relevance. The findings emphasize the importance of balancing tradition and modernity, advocating for Arabi-Malayalam as a complementary cultural asset alongside standard Malayalam. This revitalization effort not only preserves a vital link to the Mappila community's past but also fosters cultural pride, intellectual advancement, and social cohesion in contemporary world.

Keywords: *Arabi-Malayalam, Community Identity, Cultural Heritage, Script Preservation, Strategies for Revitalization.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji pelestarian dan revitalisasi Arabi-Malayalam, sebuah aksara hibrida unik yang menggabungkan aksara Arab dengan bahasa Malayalam, yang secara historis digunakan oleh komunitas Muslim Mappila di Malabar, Kerala, India. Penelitian ini membahas penurunan penggunaan Arabi-Malayalam akibat perubahan sosiobudaya, reformasi pendidikan, dan gerakan keagamaan, serta menyoroti pentingnya aksara ini dalam mempertahankan identitas budaya dan warisan. Menggunakan metodologi kualitatif berbasis literatur, penelitian ini menganalisis perkembangan historis, konteks budaya, dan kasus perbandingan pelestarian bahasa yang terancam punah. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi kontribusi sastra dan ilmiah yang kaya dari Arabi-Malayalam serta tantangan yang ditimbulkan oleh berkurangnya penggunaannya di kalangan generasi muda di wilayah tersebut. Penelitian ini mengusulkan strategi multifaset untuk revitalisasi, termasuk keterlibatan komunitas, inisiatif pendidikan, integrasi teknologi, dan dukungan institusional, untuk memastikan relevansi aksara ini tetap terjaga. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya menyeimbangkan tradisi dan modernitas, serta mengadvokasi Arabi-Malayalam sebagai aset budaya pelengkap di samping Malayalam standar. Upaya revitalisasi ini tidak hanya melestarikan ikatan vital dengan masa lalu komunitas Mappila, tetapi juga memupuk kebanggaan budaya, kemajuan intelektual, dan kohesi sosial di dunia kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: *Arabi-Malayalam, Identitas Komunitas, Warisan Budaya, Pelestarian Aksara, Strategi Revitalisasi.*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, numerous languages have been eradicated or absorbed by the dominant languages and cultures. In some instances, the spoken form of a language remains largely intact, whereas its writing system almost disappears. Many linguists, epigraphers, and anthropologists have dedicated efforts to studying and preserving such endangered scripts and languages. Similarly, the preservation and revitalization of Arabi-Malayalam, a unique writing system that combines Arabic script with Malayalam, presents an intriguing case study of linguistic conservation. This script, once widely used among the Muslim communities of Malabar, India, has seen a significant decline in usage over the past century due to various sociocultural and political factors. Efforts to revitalize Arabi-Malayalam require a multifaceted approach involving linguistic research, community engagement, and educational initiatives to ensure its survival and relevance in the modern era.

The development of Arabi-Malayalam aligns with the broader pattern of Arabic-local hybrid scripts emerging in regions influenced by Islamic culture. Like Swahili, Urdu, and Ottoman Turkish, Arabi-Malayalam represents a fusion of the Arabic script with the Malayalam language of Kerala, India. Arabi-Malayalam likely originated through Arab traders' interactions with the Malabar Coast, a key hub in the Indian Ocean trade network. As Islam spread in the region, particularly among the Mappila Muslim community, there was a need for a script that could represent Malayalam using Arabic characters. This hybrid script allowed the local population to engage with Islamic texts and Arabic literature, while maintaining their native language. Studying the origins and development of Arabi-Malayalam could provide valuable insights into the processes of cultural hybridization and the role of language in shaping religious and cultural identities in medieval Islamic society.

Previous studies including Arafath, P. K. Y.'s 'Polyglossic Malabar: Arabi-Malayalam and the Muhiyuddinmala in the age of transition (1600s-1750s)', provides evidence that Arabi-Malayalam emerged in the 17th century as a transliterated script to facilitate local Islamic vernacular writing and teaching.¹ Cheerangote, S. S.'s. 'An Analysis of the Outcomes of Language Contacts: with Special Reference to Arabi-Malayalam', analyses contact-induced grammatical patterns, identifying systematic borrowing of elements like conjunctions and number markers from Arabic.² Kotaparamban, M's 'Sea, community and language: a study on the origin and development of Arabi-Malayalam language of Mappila Muslims of Malabar', highlights

¹ P. K. Yasser Arafath, "Abstract [Polyglossic Malabar: Arabi-Malayalam and the Muhiyuddinmala in the Age of Transition (1600s–1750s)]," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 30, no. 3 (July 2020): 517–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186320000085>.

² Sayed Saidalavi Cheerangote, "An Analysis of the Outcomes of Language Contacts: With Special Reference to Arabi-Malayalam," *JL3T (Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching)* 8, no. 2 (December 2022): 56–68, <https://doi.org/10.32505/jl3t.v8i2.5004>.

that the need for Islamic instruction in a locally accessible vernacular was a key driver for adapting the Arabic script to represent Malayalam phonemes³, Kooria, M. presents a comprehensive study on ‘Arabi-Malayalam texts at the British Library,’ identifying several works printed between the 1870s and 1970s.⁴ S. Hussain’s ‘Arabic Malayalam: Language and Culture’ highlights the existence of Arabi-Malayalam works in both prose and poetry which encompassing not only literary compositions but also scientific, religious, philosophical, and historical texts.⁵ However, previous studies have not focused on determining the scope and method of preserving abandoned scripts. This study aims to address this gap by exploring potential methods for revitalizing the abandoned Arabi-Malayalam script.

Research Question of the study “How has the Arabi-Malayalam script contributed to the preservation of cultural heritage among Malabar Muslims, and what strategies can be implemented to ensure its continued relevance and use in contemporary society?” underscores the importance of understanding the historical and cultural context of Arabi-Malayalam as well as its potential role in contemporary Muslim communities in Malabar. The three major objectives of this study were as follows: 1. Explore the historical and cultural significance of the Arabi-Malayalam script in the Mappila Muslim community of Malabar, India. 2. Examine the factors that led to the decline in Arabi-Malayalam usage over time and investigate the consequences of losing this script on the community’s cultural heritage and identity. 3. Propose strategies for revitalizing and preserving Arabi-Malayalam in contemporary society, including analyzing methods for reintroduction, exploring the role of technology, and advocating government support and educational initiatives.

However, a major challenge in conducting studies in this area is the misconception. It’s like asking, ‘What is the scope of Arabi-Malayalam when there is Malayalam as mother tongue?’ The second is whether the reuse of such languages will isolate Muslims from other communities or make them feel alienated. Further analysis is needed to answer these questions, and this study does not argue that Mappila Muslims remain a distinct linguistic group with specific scripts. Instead, it advocates the preservation of a script along with its religious and cultural essence, which their ancestors had revered for centuries. The researcher aims to promote traditional preservation that unites Malayalam and Malayalees while maintaining the country’s integrity. Researchers from across India and the world are working to reclaim and reuse old scripts and languages as a part of their heritage. This study suggests that efforts to reclaim old script languages, both academically and otherwise, are relevant to the Arabic Malayalam of Mappilas. In this context, the abandonment of Arabi-Malayalam, which has contributed to preserving India’s cultural heritage in a way that is beneficial to both the country and

³ Musadhique Kottaparamban, “SEA, COMMUNITY AND LANGUAGE: A STUDY ON THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ARABI- MALAYALAM LANGUAGE OF MAPPILA MUSLIMS OF MALABAR,” *Muallim Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, October 2, 2019, 406–16, <https://doi.org/10.33306/mjssh/31>.

⁴ Mahmood Kooria, “Arabic-Malayalam Texts at the British Library: Themes, Genres, and Production,” *International Journal of Islam in Asia* 3, nos. 1–2 (September 2023): 89–127, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25899996-20230014>.

⁵ Government of Kerala, “Arabic Malayalam: Language and Culture,” *ISHAL PAITHRKAM* 43, no. 1 (September 2025), <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.17210958>.

the world, should not be encouraged. Mappila Muslims should learn, speak, and practice other languages, including Malayalam, while also preserving their traditions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is primarily qualitative and literature-based, aimed at comprehensively exploring the preservation and revitalization of the Arabi-Malayalam script. This research focuses on the historical and cultural significance of Arabi-Malayalam, the factors contributing to its decline, and strategies for its revitalization. The study centered on the Mappila Muslim community of Malabar, Kerala, as the main social group historically connected to Arabi-Malayalam, while also considering relevant stakeholders such as educators, religious institutions (madrasas), community organizations, and scholars involved in preservation efforts.

Data collection relied on an extensive literature review encompassing historical texts, academic research, archival materials, and contemporary studies on language preservation. Comparative case studies of other endangered languages and script revitalization efforts provide contextual frameworks and theoretical grounding. The qualitative analysis of textual sources involved examining literary, religious, scientific, and cultural documents written in Arabi-Malayalam. Analytical techniques included historical and cultural analysis to trace the script's development, usage, and decline; comparative analysis to identify adaptable preservation strategies; and thematic content analysis to extract recurring themes related to cultural identity, linguistic hybridization, and community engagement. Synthesizing findings from multiple sources, this study proposes multifaceted strategies integrating educational, technological, community-based, and institutional approaches, ensuring a holistic understanding of Arabi-Malayalam's historical trajectory and contemporary challenges grounded in scholarly research and community realities. This methodology ensures a holistic understanding of Arabi-Malayalam's historical trajectory and contemporary challenges, providing a foundation for actionable preservation strategies grounded in scholarly research and community realities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that Arabi-Malayalam possesses profound historical and cultural significance for the Mappila Muslim community of Malabar, serving as an essential medium of religious, literary, and intellectual expression. This research identifies multiple factors contributing to the script's decline, including religious reform movements, educational reforms favoring the standardized Malayalam script, and broader sociocultural modernization that marginalized Arabi-Malayalam's use. This decline has resulted in a generational gap, with younger community members increasingly disconnected from the script's rich literary and cultural heritage and the language itself. Through qualitative, literature-based analysis, this study reveals recurring themes of cultural identity, linguistic hybridization, and community engagement, which underpin the proposed multifaceted revitalization strategies. These strategies emphasize educational initiatives, technological integration, community involvement, and institutional support to restore the script's relevance, while balancing tradition with

contemporary societal needs. Ultimately, this research underscores that preserving Arabi-Malayalam is essential not only for maintaining cultural continuity and pride but also for unlocking a valuable corpus of historical knowledge, thereby reinforcing the Mappila community's unique identity within the broader Kerala and Indian cultural landscape.

A Brief History of Origin of Arabi-Malayalam

Mappila Muslims are inhabitants of Malabar, a region in the northern part of Kerala state in southern India. They have a rich cultural heritage that blends Arab, Persian, and Indian influence. The Mappila community has a long history dating back to the age when Arab traders first arrived on the Malabar coast for the spice trade. The term mappila is believed to have originated from the Malayalam words '*maha*' (great) and '*pilla*' (child), signifying the respected status of these early Arab settlers. Over time, the Mappila community developed a unique linguistic and cultural identity, blending the elements of Arabic and Malayalam. This fusion gave rise to Arabi-Malayalam, a written form of Malayalam using Arabic script, which became an important medium for religious and literary expression among Mappila Muslims.

How did the distinct scripts and languages of Arabic from West Asia and Malayalam from South Asia converge to create new scripts? Arabic is a Semitic language that has a rich history dating back over 1,500 years and has significantly influenced many other languages, including Persian, Turkish, and Spanish. While Malayalam is a Dravidian language spoken in the Indian state of Kerala and the union territories of Lakshadweep and Puducherry which has a rich literary tradition dating back to the 9th century CE, with a diverse range of literary works including poetry, prose, and drama⁶. Significantly, the convergence of Arabic and Malayalam scripts resulted from centuries of religious, cultural, and commercial interactions between West Asia and South India. As Arab traders settled along the Malabar Coast, they needed a way to communicate effectively with the local Malayalam-speaking population. Rather than a single event, convergence was a gradual adaptation of Semitic Arabic script to phonetically represent the Dravidian Malayalam language.

The major reasons for the birth of Arabi-Malayam were the need to bridge linguistic gaps in facilitating interactions between Arabs and Mappila Muslims during trade, and the demand for phonetic adaptation to ensure effective communication with Arabs and accurate pronunciation of Arabic. The script served not only as a bridge between Mappila Muslims and Arab Muslims, but also as an innovative medium of communication among community members. Gradually, this unique script allowed for the creation of a rich literary tradition that included devotional poetry, historical narratives, and religious commentaries. Later, the Arabi-Malayalam became an essential tool for maintaining cultural identity and fostering a sense of unity among Mappila Muslims in Malabar.

Interestingly, such hybrid scripts also originated in other parts of India and the Muslim world. Muslims in southern India and Sri Lanka have been using the Arabic script to record Tamil texts since at least the eighteenth century, a practice known as 'Arabic-Tamil' or 'Arwi', which has been interpreted variously as a simple script adaptation, a

⁶ Nalini Natarajan and Emmanuel S. Nelson, eds., *Handbook of Twentieth-Century Literatures of India* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1996), 181–200, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400661556>.

distinct Tamil style, or even a separate language⁷. The key features of the Arabi Malayalam script are as follows. It was designed to represent the phonemes of both Arabic and Malayalam. It is written from right to left, similarly to Arabic. Its vowel symbols are marked as diacritics above and below consonant letters. The script uses secondary signs such as dots and curved lines on existing Arabic characters. Adaptation for representing Malayalam sounds that do not exist in Arabic, The script includes unique graphemes for Malayalam phonemes like phonemes like *e*, *e*⁻, *o*, *o*⁻ and diphthongs *ai*, *ai* and *au*, *au* are represented as sequences of letters pronounced as *ay* and *aw* respectively.⁸

Richness of Arabi Malayalam Literature

The literary richness of this script surprised both the Indian and foreign researchers. Studies on this subject highlight the great scientific contributions of the Arabi-Malayalam script. Arabi Malayalam was a script that was used in all aspects of the Muslim community in Malabar, beyond religious purposes. This script contributed not only to social, cultural, artistic, and literary fields but also to the scientific, technological, and intellectual fields of a period, including health, medicine, mathematics, and astronomy.

In addition to Islamic studies, writings on Hinduism and Christianity are also available in Arabi Malayalam. Mappila Ramayanam is an Arabi-Malayalam composition worth mentioning. Many works that have gained public attention in writing are in verse form. A special category called *Malapatatt* has a special place in Arabi-Malayalam poetry. These songs were passed down orally among the Mappila Muslims of Malabar and preserved for generations. Muhiyuddin Mala, which contains the praises of Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani, which is over 400 years old, is a noteworthy work in this category⁹. This work was written by a scholar named Qadi Muhammad Calicut. Arabi Malayalam later helped to fully transform the literary traditions of the Mappilas, which had been passed down orally for centuries, into a written form. We can assume that Arabi-Malayalam has made significant contributions to multifaceted fields because it has evolved from being just a script to a language.

A recent study conducted by S. Hussain, 'Arabic Malayalam: Language and Culture' highlights the existence of Arabi-Malayalam works in both prose and poetry which encompass not only literary compositions but also scientific, religious, philosophical, and historical texts. Furthermore, numerous periodicals, publications, and pamphlets have been produced in the Arabi-Malayalam language. In addition to translations from Sanskrit, such as the *Ashtanga Hridayam*, a variety of medical texts have been authored by Arabi-Malayalam. A distinctive method for documenting and preserving medical knowledge was developed in Arabi-Malayalam, wherein notes were composed separately using Arabi Malayalam scripts, eschewing the conventional method of writing them together. These medical texts may have served as valuable

⁷ Torsten Tschacher, "Abstract (From Script to Language: The Three Identities of 'Arabic-Tamil')," *South Asian History and Culture* 9, no. 1 (January 2018): 16–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2017.1411052>.

⁸ Saranya Chandran, "A Comprehensive Study of Medieval and Early Modern Scripts in Kerala" (MA Thesis, Central European University, 2022), 37–38, https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2022/chandran_saranya.pdf.

⁹ U. Mohammed, *Educational Empowerment of Kerala Muslims: A Socio-Historical Perspective* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 2007), 38.

resources for physicians who were unable to pursue formal academic studies.¹⁰

Kooria, M. conducted an in-depth analysis of ‘Arabi-Malayalam texts at the British Library’ cataloguing a range of works published from the 1870s to the 1970s. Among these, he underscores the significance of early texts, notably ‘Muhy al-Din Mala’, recognized as the earliest text in the Arabi-Malayalam tradition, authored by Qadi Muhammad al-Kalikuti in 1607, with a printed edition from 1873 in Thalassery. Another important text is ‘Alif Enna Manikkam’, penned by Qadi Muhy al-Din, the progeny of Qadi Muhammad. The collection further includes the works of Moyinkutti Vaidyar (d. 1892), a preeminent poet in the tradition, with several editions of his esteemed texts, some of which were published during his lifetime, such as ‘Badr Patappattu’ - Badr al-Kubra, ‘Uhd Patappattu’, ‘Badr al-Munir Husn al-Jamal’, and ‘Malappuram Qissappattu’. Additionally, the study covers texts on historical events, cultural narratives, legal discourse, and mystical themes, including a poem about a cyclone in Calicut in 1909, a poem about a regional flood in 1924, and a biography of Tipu Sultan titled ‘Yathartha Charitram’ (‘the real history’). Other significant works include ‘Chandira Sundari Mala’ by P. K. Halima (1909-1959), a well-known hagiographical poem about the marriage of Aisha to the Prophet Muhammad, two texts on the Sufi saint Sayyida Nafisa (d. 830 CE), and writings on Islamic jurisprudence (Shafi’i School) and Sufism (Qadiriyya and Shadhiliyya orders). The collection also comprises educational materials from the Madrasat al-Islamiyya in Tirurangadi on theology, law, and mysticism, ‘Ammayippattu’, a poem extolling an aunt in a matrilineal family, a text detailing ear piercing customs in a conversational poem format, ‘Qissat Amir Hamza’, a narrative about the Prophet’s uncle, Hamza bin Abd al-Muttalib, ‘Qissat Qamar Zaman’, a fictional romance, and ‘Jinn Pattu’ and ‘Tamim al-Dari Pattu’, two early works from 1873 that depict mystical experiences in poetic form.¹¹

Lastly, but not least, the most celebrated work on Arab-Malayalm, O. Abu’s ‘*Arabi malayala Sahitya charitram*’ (History of Arabi-Malayalam Literature) comprehensively examines the historical, linguistic, and literary aspects of Arabi-Malayalam and explores the origins of Arabi-Malayalam, its etymological and lexicological elements. The book’s detailed historical analysis and focus on the Mappila Muslim literary tradition of Kerala have made it a crucial reference for subsequent research, influencing later academic works and serving as an important archival resource for scholars interested in this unique linguistic and cultural phenomenon¹².

This diverse collection of Arabi-Malayalam, which previous authors have analyzed in their studies, showcases the breadth and depth of the literary tradition, spanning religious, historical, cultural, and mystical themes. The inclusion of works from various time periods and the authors demonstrates the evolution and endurance of this unique literary form. Furthermore, the preservation of these texts in the British Library highlights the importance of Arabi-Malayalam literature as a valuable resource for

¹⁰ Government of Kerala, “Arabic Malayalam.”

¹¹ Kooria, “Arabic-Malayalam Texts at the British Library,” 94–125.

¹² O. Abu, “Arabi Malayala Sahitya Charitram (History of Arabi-Malayalam Language),” Book in Internet Archive, Kottayam, 1970, ark:/13960/t9387v328, JaiGyan, <http://indianculture.gov.in/reports-proceedings/arabi-malayala-sahitya-charitram>.

scholars and researchers studying the Malabar region's cultural and linguistic heritage.

Unfortunately, the above studies represent only a fraction of the vast corpus of works produced in this unique script, leaving many important texts that are yet to be discovered, preserved, and studied. The lack of comprehensive research on these texts presents a significant gap in our understanding of their cultural and historical contexts. Efforts to locate, digitize, and analyze the remaining works are crucial to preserving this invaluable linguistic heritage.

How it lost its Legacy and its Effects in Cultural Life

How did Arabi-Malayalam lose its legacy? The decline of Arabi-Malayalam can be attributed to several factors, including internal religious reform movements, the rise of Malayalam as the primary language of education and administration in Kerala, and the shift towards modernization and secularization in Kerala society, further contributing to the waning influence of this unique script, as in other traditional Muslim communities.

One of the major factors behind the decline of Arabi-Malayalam can be attributed to the standardization of modern Malayalam script, coupled with government-sponsored educational reforms in the early 20th century, which led to widespread adoption of the new script and reduced the need for Arabi-Malayalam. Second, internal religious reform movements within the Muslim community challenged traditional Arabi-Malayalam texts and practices, leading to the destruction of manuscripts and a shift towards mainstream Malayalam. Third, the rise of secular education has increased integration with the wider Kerala community. Additionally, the loss of historical texts, printing difficulties, and the gradual disconnection of younger generations from Arabi-Malayalam literary heritage accelerated its decline. Today, the script is primarily confined to madrasa textbooks and has lost its prominent role in the rich literary tradition of the region.

The decline of Arabi-Malayalam has led to a significant cultural disconnection between generations within the community. Younger members struggle to understand and appreciate the traditional texts, poetry, and historical documents written in this script. The new generation forgotten the relevance of the Arabi-Malayalam. Efforts to revive and preserve this unique script have been limited, with few institutions offering formal education on reading and writing Arabi-Malayalam. As a result, a significant portion of Mappila Muslim history and literature remains untapped and unexplored, potentially leading to a permanent loss of valuable cultural and historical insights.

Why should the script be revitalized?

The revitalization of Arabi-Malayalam is crucial for preserving the rich cultural heritage and historical legacy of the Mappila Muslim community. By reconnecting younger generations with this script, we can bridge the gap between the past and present, enabling a deeper understanding of their roots and traditions. Moreover, reviving Arabi-Malayalam would unlock a treasure trove of untapped knowledge, providing valuable insights into the community's history, literature, and cultural evolution. The revitalization of Arabi-Malayalam extends beyond preserving cultural heritage; it serves as a vital link to the wealth of untapped knowledge and historical records. This script, unique to the Mappila Muslim community, holds the key to understanding the centuries of intellectual, literary, and social development that have shaped the region. By reviving this writing system, researchers and scholars can gain access to a vast array of manuscripts,

documents, and texts that have remained largely unexplored due to declining literacy in Arabi-Malayalam.

In this discussion, let us begin with a previous study by Shibila, the study ‘The Unsung Annals of Mappilas: A Study of Arabi-Malayalam Literature’ argues that the history and literature of the Mappila community have been systematically neglected and misrepresented in mainstream Indian academia. One primary argument is that Mappila literature, particularly works in Arabi-Malayalam such as Muhyudheen Mala, has been unfairly excluded from the literary canon. The paper also contends that the Arabi-Malayalam texts were instrumental in the development of the Malayalam language, an influence overlooked by linguists and historians. The second major argument is that the Mappilas’ century-spanning anti-colonial and anti-feudal struggles have been wrongly depicted as communal riots by imperialist historians or completely ignored by elitist nationalist historiographies. The author posits that Padappattu (war-songs) are crucial and authentic indigenous sources that counter these distorted historical narratives by presenting struggles from the perspective of the oppressed, thereby allowing for an accurate reconstruction of Mappila history.¹³

As a consequence of modernization and colonization, numerous Muslim communities have neglected their cultural heritage and lack interest in discussions regarding its preservation. The discourse within the Mappila community regarding the preservation and revival of the Arabi Malayalam script reveals complex tensions between tradition and modernity. Some community members view abandoning Arabi Malayalam as a symbol of progress and modernity, associating it with integration into mainstream society and being influenced by globalization and technological advancements. Conversely, a smaller group continues to use the script primarily for religious rituals and education, often without full recognition of its cultural heritage. This divergence reflects the broader challenges of balancing cultural preservation with aspirations for social and economic mobility. This study identifies the need to move beyond these differentiated views by developing a third perspective that neither wholly rejects traditional scripts nor clings exclusively to them, recognizing that intellectual and cultural advancement requires a nuanced approach.

Understanding the two types of social perspectives exists among Muslims of Malabar regarding the preservation of Arabic and Malayalam. This study suggests that, while both approaches are critically examined, it is best to develop a third perspective. Although the practice of abandoning old scripts and shifting into Malayalam can be justified as part of the renaissance, it is not right to abandon the heritage that a society has developed over centuries. In the new era, no intellectual or cultural advancement was possible by relying solely on Arabic and Malayalam.

When the public attention of Mappila Muslims lost towards the preservation of the script, some initiatives were taken by concerned individuals and organizations to revive interest in the Arabi Malayalam script. These efforts include organizing workshops, publishing books, and creating digital resources to teach and promote scripts. Hopefully, the Moinkutty Vaidyar Academy, Government of Kerala, of Kerala, the C.H.

¹³ Shibila A, “ISHAL PAITHRKAM Issue 39,” ed. Government of Kerala, preprint, Zenodo, September 30, 2024, 132–45, <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.14212043>.

Mohammed Koya Chair for Studies on Developing Societies, University of Calicut, and the community enthusiasts who are currently supporting such initiatives, deserve special mention. Some traditional madrasa boards print, distribute and teach books in Arabic and Malayalam, Particularly the Samastha Kerala Islam Matha Vidyabhyasa Board and Sunni Vidyabhyasa Board continue to use Arabi-Malayalam texts for primary and intermediate religious education. Despite these challenges, the inclusion of Arabi-Malayalam texts in the madrasa curriculum is worth mentioning.

Proposed Strategies for Preservation and Revitalization

A multifaceted approach is needed to preserve and revitalize Arabi-Malayalam. Educational initiatives are the cornerstones of this effort. Workshops and books dedicated to teaching scripts can spark interests and cultivate expertise. By incorporating Arabi-Malayalam texts into libraries, young learners can develop a strong foundation for this linguistic tradition. Schools can also play a role by offering advanced courses in Arabi-Malayalam reading, broadening their reach beyond religious education. The digital age presents challenges and opportunities. Developing language learning apps and digital resources tailored to the needs of the community can make Arabi-Malayalam more accessible and appealing to the younger generations. These tools can bridge the gap between traditional learning methods and modern technology, ensuring the relevance of scripts in a rapidly changing world. The digital realm offers new preservation avenues. Creating digital archives of existing Arabi-Malayalam texts and manuscripts ensures that these valuable resources are not lost. Encouraging community members to embrace new technologies for writing and publishing can breathe fresh life into a script, making it a living, evolving entity rather than a relic of the past.

Community engagement is crucial to this endeavor. The older generation, with its wealth of knowledge and experience, can serve as invaluable mentors. By encouraging them to share Arabi-Malayalam studies with positive values, a sense of continuity and cultural pride could be fostered. Publication and documentation efforts play a vital role in keeping the Arabi-Malayalam alive and thriving. Printing and publishing studies and literary works that resonate with the Mappila community can demonstrate the script's relevance. Moreover, documenting the traditional ecological knowledge associated with Arabi-Malayalam highlights its practical applications and cultural significance. Government and institutional support can provide the necessary resources and recognition to increase preservation efforts. Collaborations with organizations such as The Moinkutty Vaidyar Academy and Calicut University CH Chair can bring academic rigor and institutional backing to the cause. Advocating for the official recognition of Arabi-Malayalam as a valuable cultural asset can open doors for funding and support at both the state and national levels. As these initiatives unfold, a new chapter in the story of the Arabi-Malayalam begins to take shape. It is the tale of a community coming together to honor its past while embracing the future, ensuring that this unique script continues to enrich Kerala's cultural landscape for generations.

Inspiration from Similar Studies

There are valuable resources for those interested in or working on preserving languages at risk of disappearing that can guide the preservation strategies of Arabi-Malayalam. Among these, The Oxford Handbook of Endangered Languages provides a

thorough overview of the efforts to address the crisis of endangered languages. It serves as a comprehensive reference guide that covers the entire field of endangered languages by showcasing different perspectives on language endangerment and increasing understanding of language endangerment, documentation, and revitalization. By doing so, the book aims to inspire new ideas and research to support endangered languages¹⁴.

In the study of Paul J. Meighan, “Indigenous Language Revitalization Using TEK-Nology : How Can Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Technology Support Intergenerational Language Transmission?”, three major approaches have been discussed regarding how to preserve indigenous languages. Based on this study, the Community-Led Approach will be useful for Arabi-Malayalam. This would mean involving community members, speakers, and cultural leaders in every phase of the research, from the design to implementation of Arabi-Malayalam. A language revitalization committee (LRC) composed of community members is a concrete example. The use of Decolonizing Methodology can be used to identify and adopt a culturally specific framework rooted in its unique history and traditions to guide the research ethically, as the author denoted methodologies like Biskaabiiyang (‘Return to Ourselves’) and Dùthchas (‘Ancestral Bonds’) to ground the research in Indigenous worldviews. Similarly, the relational approach involves conducting research and selecting participants based on existing family and community relationships (kincentric and relational approaches). This fostered a safe space for sharing. Applying this to Arabi-Malayalam would involve working within established community and family networks to build trust and gather knowledge (Meighan 2024).

Another study by Emilee J. Gehlert on ‘Mayan Glyphs and Orthography Rifts: The Process of Script Extinction and Revitalization’ reveals practical Examples which can be implemented in the case of Arabi-Malayalam, which are: education and workshops, creating new works, such as poems and commemorative stelae, using the ancient script, technological integration to encode the script into Unicode to make the script digitally accessible, and government programs by establishing institutes and academies to promote and preserve indigenous languages¹⁵.

The above studies indicate that preserving Arabi-Malayalam requires a multifaceted approach that combines community involvement, decolonizing methodologies, relational approaches, educational initiatives, technological integration, and government support to ensure the language’s revitalization and continued use in both traditional and modern contexts.

Message to Traditional Communities

The message of this study to other traditional Muslim communities with special medieval scripts is that preserving and revitalizing such unique scripts is essential for maintaining cultural identity, intellectual heritage, and social cohesion. The study emphasizes that abandoning these scripts risks losing valuable historical knowledge,

¹⁴ Kenneth L. Rehg and Lyle Campbell, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Endangered Languages*, Oxford Handbooks Online Linguistics (New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190610029.001.0001>.

¹⁵ Emilee J. Gehlert, “Mayan Glyphs and Orthography Rifts: The Process of Script Extinction and Revitalization” (MA Thesis, Dallas International University, 2024), https://www.diu.edu/documents/theses/Gehlert_Emilee-thesis.pdf.

literary traditions, and cultural pride that have been developed over centuries. It advocates for a balanced approach that neither fully rejects traditional scripts nor clings exclusively to them but seeks nuanced preservation to foster intellectual and cultural advancement.

The study highlights the importance of community engagement, educational initiatives, technological integration, and institutional support as key strategies for revitalization. It encourages these communities to view their scripts not as barriers to modernity or integration but as complementary cultural assets that enrich their heritage and identity. By doing so, these communities can bridge generational gaps, reconnect younger members with their roots, and contribute to a broader understanding of their historical and cultural contributions. Moreover, the study suggests learning from similar efforts worldwide, adopting community-led, culturally rooted, and technologically supported methodologies to ensure the continued relevance and vitality of their scripts. This approach promotes unity within the broader society while honoring distinctive cultural legacies.

In summary, the study's message is a call to recognize the value of traditional scripts as living cultural treasures that deserve preservation and revitalization through multifaceted, inclusive, and modern strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the Arabi-Malayalam script holds profound historical and cultural significance for the Mappila Muslim community, serving as a vital medium of religious, literary, and intellectual expression. This research identifies the key factors behind the script's decline, including educational reforms favoring standardized Malayalam, religious reform movements, and broader sociocultural modernization, which have contributed to a generational disconnect from this rich heritage. Despite these challenges, Arabi-Malayalam embodies a unique linguistic hybridization that reflects the community's cultural identity and its historical roots. The findings emphasize the necessity of a balanced approach that transcends different understandings, neither fully abandoning traditional scripts nor clinging exclusively to them, thus fostering intellectual and cultural advancement through their nuanced preservation. This study contributes to contemporary academia by highlighting how language and script preservation influences community identity, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and social cohesion, all of which are integral to collective cognitive and cultural processes. The proposed multifaceted revitalization strategies, encompassing educational initiatives, technological integration, community engagement, and institutional support, offer a comprehensive framework to sustain Arabi-Malayalam's relevance, thereby reinforcing cultural pride and intellectual continuity within the Mappila community in the face of modernity.

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