

# Food And Mappila Identity Formation: An Ethno-Historical Study On The Ramadan Fasting And Nercca Cuisine In South Malabar

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## Abstract

This research article examines the role of food in the identity formation of the Mappila Muslim community of South Malabar, a region on the northern part of the state of Kerala, India, by analysing their food culture during the month of Ramadan and festival of Nercca, a variant of saint worship. The Mappilas are descendants of Arab traders who settled in Malabar and intermarried with the locals. In the course of time Mappilas developed a unique food culture that reflected their hybrid identity, religious beliefs, and historical experiences. This article analyses how the Mappila food practices related with Ramadan fasting and nercca shaped their community identity along with the influence of local culture and colonialism. The article uses ethnographic and historical methods, drawing on primary and secondary sources such as oral narratives, cookbooks, archival documents, fieldwork, interviews, observations, and literature review. The main argument of this article is that food is a powerful medium for expressing and negotiating identity, and that the Mappila cuisine connected with Ramdan fasting and Nercca is a rich and complex manifestation of their cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Food, Identity, Ethnography, Mappila, Malabar, Islam, Nercca, Ramadan fasting.

## Introduction:

For humans, food is essential for their survival. More than that, it is also a way people express themselves, communicate to each other and form their identity. When we look at how,

when and who we eat food with, we find reflected in us our own identity in terms of cultural values, beliefs or history as well as social and economic issues affecting us. Thus, it may be argued that the concept of food culture itself carries an aspect which is ever changing within its own complexity due to the influence of social and historical factors. One such food culture that exemplifies this dynamism and complexity is that of the Mappila community, a Muslim minority group in the southern Indian state of Kerala.

The Mappila community in the South Malabar region has many different types of food that connect to their religion and other forms of social life. The purpose of consuming these Mappila foods extends beyond nourishment; they are also significant when it comes to defining their identity, belief, and community solidarity. This study, "Food and Mappila Identity Formation: An ethno historical study on the Ramadan fasting and Nercca Cuisine in South Malabar", aims at looking into the symbolism in cultural practices as regards to who the Mappilas are historically through an investigation on food culture during the Ramadan fasting and Nercca festival, a variant of Saint worship. The research topic underlines two interrelated aspects in the life of Mappilas: their cultural identity and historical continuity behind the social practices. Over centuries, Mappila community formation has been influenced by trade routes from around the world, colonialism and interaction with different cultural groups, This study aims at analysing the significance and impact of food in Mappila identity construction specifically focusing on the modes of food cultures during Nercca festival and Ramadan fasting.

**Background:**

Malabar, a region situated in the northern part of Kerala, has a deep rooted cultural lineage that is largely influenced by its maritime history. It used to be a pivotal spot for global commerce, hence, interest from traders belonging to different nations like Rome, Greece, and Arabia. A number of visitors from abroad, such as Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, French, English etc., contributed to the development of the Mappila Muslim community thus giving the area a more cosmopolitan look. The year 1498 saw the entry of Portuguese that triggered an era of colonialism in Malabar thereby changing food culture while creating a path for the entry of other European nations. Initially, local Hindu rulers governed this place, then by the Mysorean rulers, and eventually by the British until 1947. The British had a direct form of governance unlike in the nearby

princely states where they exercised their power indirectly. In the 1920s, the large scale Syrian Christians migration from South Kerala to Malabar, who gaining influence in landownership, brought new agricultural practices which later influenced the Mappila diet. Malabar was completely incorporated into the newly formed Kerala state in 1956 with districts such as Kozhikode, Malappuram, Palghat and Kannur. Thus, one can see the role of Malabar as a cultural and economic melting point in its historical past.

The Mappilas, who are one of the oldest Muslim communities in Kerala, came into being through the trade and intermarriage between Malabar and Arabia; In Malabar, their co-existence with the local Hindus and the Christians promoted the creation of a new kind of culture that was different from the rest of Kerala. Food in this region is a blend of different cultures as can be seen from the names of several dishes which are of Arabic and Persian origin. It is not just about an identity that is shared among people but there are also certain dishes which are meant for people of certain castes; the cook's caste has historically been used in discriminating against some people whereby food has been used as a means of perpetuating social hierarchy in communities. The culinary practices of this region are therefore reflective of its social diversity as well as the various cultural impacts on it notably the Arabs of the Middle East. This study uses an ethno historical method which involves looking at historical records, oral traditions, and contemporary practices in order to explore how food related traditions of Mappilas have developed over time and their significance in identity formation.

**Significance:**

The significance of this study lies in the fact that the Mappila food practices observed during Ramadan, which is a period of fasting, reflection, and community Solidarity, have the potential of being understood as a tool through which Mappila identity can be described. The breaking of the fast (Iftar) as well as the pre-dawn meal (Suhoor) in the holy month of Ramadan are observances that are not only religious but also social, for they enhance cohesion in a community and ensure that there is cultural continuity within the community. Similarly, the examination of Nercca cuisine that which pertains to particular Mappila celebrations underscores how this group employs culinary art as a symbolic representation of their community identity. The food served in these kinds of practices can communicate memories, pass on good morals and tell stories

about their connections with the land. By focusing on the Mappila community's Ramadan fasting and Nercca cuisine, the study can offer a nuanced view of how traditions are maintained, adapted, and celebrated in the face of changing social and cultural landscapes.

The present study could make a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions about what we eat and who we are, which are relevant not only in some societies but across the world as well.. The study can also explore how the preparation and sharing of food during religious and cultural events serve as acts of cultural transmission and resistance to homogenization. Using an ethno historical approach, this article will combine historical sources and ethnographic data to understand the past and present of Mappila food culture. As a member of the Mappila community, the author have long been fascinated by the intricate interplay between Mappila social practices and food culture. Organizing an erudite lecture series in 2018 provided the author with the platform to study deeper into this subject. The author hopes that this article will contribute to the academic discourse on the diverse foodways of Kerala, as well as to the preservation and promotion of the unique culinary heritage of the Mappila community.

#### **Objectives:**

This research paper will address research question: How do the Food practice of Ramadan Fasting and Nercca Cuisine shaped the cultural identity of the Mappila community in South Malabar? To answer this question, the paper will pursue the following objectives:

- Analysing the influence of historical factors, including Arab trade connections and colonial legacies, on the evolution of Mappila food culture in Malabar.
- Exploring the religious significance and rituals associated with fasting, particularly during the holy month of Ramzan, and its impact on Mappila food culture.
- Investigating the role of Nercca and its food as a major social gathering and communal celebration of Mappilas in shaping Mappila identity and fostering community cohesion.
- Assessing the contemporary relevance and socio-economic implications of Mappila food practices during Ramadan fasting and nercca.

#### **Historical Context of Mappila Muslim Community in South Malabar**

The Mappila community of Malabar, also known as the Mappilas or Moplahs, is a major Muslim community in the north Kerala region of India, with a history that is deeply intertwined with global and local influences. They are said to be the descendants of Arab traders who settled in the Malabar region and married local women creating a unique mix of Arab and local cultures. Islam is said to have reached Malabar shortly after it was originated in Arabia and the first mosque in India was built in Kerala, the Cheraman Juma Masjid in the 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>i</sup>. This Arabian nexus has had profound influence on the mappila culture and food; additionally they have maintained strong links with the Gulf region even today. The arrival of the Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century is viewed as the commencement of European colonial dominance in Malabar. Due to Portuguese trade monopolies and religious intolerance, the Mappilas, predominantly a maritime community were afflicted and this led to conflicts with them<sup>ii</sup>. Due to the religious persecution of the Portuguese, the first anti-imperialist struggle in India took place in Malabar under the leadership of Mappilas<sup>iii</sup>. It is during this period that Mappila Muslims learn what to eat, what to abstain from, and how to behave as a Muslim<sup>iv</sup>.

The Portuguese bought many goods to India for their own consumptions. It is mentioned that they bought over 300 species of useful plants to India<sup>v</sup>. In Malabar, it was the Portuguese who introduced Muttamala, a sweet dish made from eggs, by blending the local and European flavours. Today Muttamala is a popular dish in various coastal places in the north of Malabar, including Koyilandi where Vasco da Gama landed<sup>vi</sup>. The present day Malayalam language uses many Portuguese words for various food items, indicating their influence in the region<sup>vii</sup>.

Following the Portuguese, the Dutch, French, and British governments established themselves in the Malabar region. The Mappilas also interacted with the Mysorean rulers, particularly during the time of Tipu Sultan in 18<sup>th</sup> C, who had a significant impact on the politics and society of Malabar. In 1792, Malabar came under British rule as per Sreerangapatnam treaty signed after the third Anglo-Mysore war<sup>viii</sup>. For the administrative convenience British split Malabar in to two; North Malabar and South Malabar in March 1793. South Malabar covers the regions included present day Kozhikode Taluk of Kozhikode district, the whole Malappuram district, Chavakkad taluk of Thrissur district, and Palakkad district excluding chitter taluk<sup>ix</sup>. With a large presence in Malabar, the Mappila population always in opposition to

Europeans especially in British controlled regions where they launched many present's revolts in the 19th century and a popular struggle in 1921 to protest against the colonial exploitation<sup>x</sup>. The development of these European connections diversified the culinary landscape even more by bringing new ingredients and ways of cooking. They also introduced new ways of eating style. Previously, the people of Malabar used to take food while seated on mats with their legs crossed. However, in its place, they started sitting on stools. Additionally, food practice of tiffin, snacks, evening tea, bed coffee, bakery products, numerous vegetables etc. were introduced during the colonial period<sup>xi</sup>.

The Mappilas have been involved in trade, agriculture, and were known as seafarers locally. They had a/ complex interactions with the local Hindu communities living around them, with both cooperation and conflict. This can be seen in the type of food they prepare which includes coconut and banana<sup>xii</sup>. In the 1920s, the local migration of Syrian Christians from southern Kerala to the Malabar had effects on local cuisine. They popularized the Kappa and Porridge in Malabar. This migration brought about a fusion of culinary practices from different parts of Kerala<sup>xiii</sup>. Globalization has made a significant impact on the Mappila community in Malabar. The Gulf Boom after 1970s, resulted in the large scale migration of Mappilas from Malabar resulting in a significant diaspora that has remained connected with their motherland and influencing the economy, cultural and social fabric of Malabar. There has been an increased interest in traditional Mappila food in the homeland and abroad as a result of the development which has not only improved the economic situation at home, but has also led to a renaissance in this type of delicacy among expatriates who are looking to connect back to their roots<sup>xiv</sup>.

Islam is pivotal to Mappila identity, as its practices and beliefs derive their foundation from Quran and Hadiths<sup>xv</sup>. Mappila community has a profound love for spiritual leaders and saints, some of whom are honoured every year during Nercca festivals. Among Mappilas, Madrasas play an important role in keeping alive the Islamic principles and values<sup>xvi</sup>. It is important to note that Mappila religious scholars have always been at the forefront in championing for change aimed at benefiting the community. The Mappila culture shows how the community has been able to accept various influences without losing its unique identity. A closer look in to their food culture can shed light on their history, social and cultural life.

### **Ramadan Fasting as a Cultural and Religious Practice**

During the month of Ramadan, Muslims worldwide, including the Mappilas of Malabar, observe fasting, prayer, and reflection as they commemorate the revelation of the Quran to Prophet Muhammad. This sacred month is a time of profound spiritual significance, marked by abstaining from food and drink from dawn until dusk. For the Mappilas fasting is more than just a religious duty; it serves as a significant cultural tradition that reinforces their sense of identity and connection with their community. The act of fasting, known as *sawm*, is considered a fundamental aspect of Islam, emphasizing its importance in their religious beliefs. This period is a time for self-control, spiritual enrichment, and heightened dedication to their faith. The Mappilas engage in nightly Taraweeh prayers, recite passages from the Quran, and engage in acts of kindness and giving, embodying the essence of Ramadan. For them, Ramadan is not solely a religious practice but also a cultural celebration that strengthens their social ties. The fasting period commences at dawn (Fajr) and concludes at sunset (Maghrib), symbolizing a day of discipline and devotion<sup>xvii</sup>.

One of the significant aspects of the Ramadan fasting is the practice of Iftar or breaking the fast. During Iftar meet, people come together to break their fast in a communal setting, usually with loved ones and those in need. These customs have been handed down for generations, preserving the cultural legacy of the community. The act of giving, known as Zakat, holds special significance among the Mappilas. During the Ramadan, they generously donate to various charitable initiatives, providing assistance to those who require support locally and even further afield. This act of generosity is not only a religious obligation but also a societal tradition that strengthens the bonds within the community<sup>xviii</sup>. The end of Ramadan is celebrated with Eid al-Fitr, a festive day filled with joy and thankfulness. The Mappilas come together for a special group prayer (Eid Salah) and pay respects at the graves of their dear ones, showing their deep respect for their ancestors and the importance of carrying on traditions within the community<sup>xix</sup>.

### **Ramadan Food**

The Mappila food culture changes during the Ramadan fasting. Both the early morning meal (Suhoor) and the meal to break the fast (Iftar) are times when families and communities come together. The traditional Mappila dishes served during Suhoor are light but packed with nutrients, providing energy for the

whole day. Iftar typically starts with the Prophet's tradition of eating dates and drinking water, followed by a variety of flavorful dishes that showcase the culinary heritage of the Malabar region. Traditional staples like 'kanji', a rice porridge, and 'neypathiri', a type of fried bread, are commonly enjoyed during Ramadan<sup>xx</sup>. The essence of Ramadan food culture among the Mappilas is the Iftar meal. The Iftar table is filled with a delicious variety of dishes, showcasing the Mappilas' appreciation for flavor and coming together as a community. The meal usually starts with dates and water, followed by a selection of snacks, main courses, and desserts. During Ramadan, Malabar cuisine stands out with its use of fragrant spices like cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg etc. Traditional cooking methods, such as 'dum' cooking, are used to slowly cook dishes like biryani over a low flame, enhancing their flavors and aromas. Fasting during Ramadan is also associated with various health benefits. Meals are carefully prepared to ensure that they provide the necessary nutrients to sustain fasting throughout the day. Suhoor, the meal before dawn, consists of foods that release energy slowly to keep individuals fuelled until sunset. The Iftar meal includes a combination of carbohydrates, proteins, and fats, as well as fruits and vegetables to replenish the body's nutrients.

Research indicates that fasting has an impact on various aspects of health, including body weight, blood sugar, insulin levels, lipid profiles, and blood pressure. However, results may vary depending on individual factors such as chronic illnesses and obesity. The holy month of Ramadan also serves as a time of learning for young members of the Mappila community. Children are educated about the significance of fasting, prayer, and values like patience, humility, and compassion. By taking part in Ramadan practices, they gain a deeper understanding of their cultural and religious roots, ensuring that these traditions are passed down to the next generation<sup>xxi</sup>.

### **Nercca Cuisine as a Mappila Culinary Tradition**

Historians like Stephen Dale and M Gangatharan describe nercca as the largest Mappila public festivals, a regional variation of saint worship commonly found in Islamic societies<sup>xxii</sup>. They view nerccas as elaborate ceremonials that combine Islamic elements with aspects of indigenous folk festivals, such as adaptations of Hindu festivals like velas and purams. These nercca festivals are held in honor of a pir, shaykh, or shahid within a ritualistic setting. Among the most well-known nerchas in Malabar are those in Kondotty,



Malappuram, Pukottur, Kuttayi, and Mamburam<sup>xxiii</sup>. One important aspect of the nercca festival is the practice of providing food to attendees. Special gatherings take place at mosques associated with the festival, where devotional songs like Malas and Mouloud are recited prior to the serving of food. The cuisine of Nercca or Nercha, is closely connected to the traditions and beliefs of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar. More than food; it embodies the spirit of unity and is a symbol of the Mappila culture. 'Nercha' in Malayalam signifies a promise or a gift, and it is a festivity where food is cooked and shared among all members of the community, regardless of their faith. The Nercha cuisine is known for its communal nature, where large cauldrons of food, such as 'Arikkadukka' (stuffed mussels) and 'Alsa' (meatballs) are cooked and shared during the Nercha festivals. These dishes, infused with local spices like cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, and nutmeg, are renowned for their rich flavors, and are often prepared overnight to enhance their taste. Nercha cuisine is prepared with the help of many, showing unity and teamwork<sup>xxiv</sup>

In Malabar, Nercca is organized by a committee affiliated with an important mosque or in honor of a martyr in various villages. The committee raises funds for the event by collecting money from locals, providing beef, and accepting voluntary donations of various goods from villagers. In the past, villagers would prepare traditional foods like Pathiri (rice bread), and offer coconut, chicken, betel nut, and other items to the committee. Villagers also made sure to contribute to the nercca in other ways in earlier times. The villagers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, made significant contributions in the form of food items for the nercca<sup>xxv</sup>. Dr. P P Abdul Razak highlights that Hindus were also actively involved in nerchas during the colonial era in Malabar<sup>xxvi</sup>. This tradition still continues today. The food items collected by the committee were mixed together and combined with deliciously prepared beef. After the mouloud, Mala songs, and prayers, the committee distributed the food to the people gathered around midnight. Long queues formed everywhere as people eagerly awaited their turn to receive food from the committee members. Many people view the preparation and distribution of the Nercha feast as a religious duty, believing that they will be rewarded by Allah for their efforts. Beef and thengachor (coconut rice) were commonly prepared. The committee made arrangements for the food preparation, with local cooks volunteering to help with the beef and rice. Typically, the food was cooked on the ground near the mosque, and then distributed from the same location. Some individuals chose to

eat their meals on-site, while others took the food to go. In the earlier times, large plates were used to serve the food, allowing 6 to 8 people to sit around a table and enjoy the feast together. This created a sense of unity and camaraderie within the mappila community. Recently, the committee introduced new regulations for food distribution. A representative from each household now collects provisions for the entire family. In some cases, the Nercha committee packages and delivers food to households where no one is able to pick it up. Despite this, they guarantee that every household in the village receives the food prepared for the Nercha.

In the modern era, Nercha feast is first served to the contributors before being shared with the rest of the community in line. "Previously, food was distributed at night, but now it is being distributed just after the noon prayer. The taste of the Nercca feast is exquisite. People, including non-Muslims, show a keen interest in having Nercca feast solely because of its delicious taste. Nercca provided villagers with a rare opportunity to enjoy scrumptious food, which they even savored the next day. Today, the older generation reminisces that the Nercha and its defining characteristics have evolved over time. These changes were largely influenced by criticism from the 'reformist' Mujahids. They view such practices as polytheistic. As a result, Nerccas are now conducted in a more restricted manner, focused mainly on distributing food to the visitors and reciting the Qur'an.

### **Role of Ramadan Food & Nercca Food in the Mappila Identity Formation**

In "At the First Table: Food and Social Identity in Early Modern Spain," written by Professor Jodi Campbell, presents the argument that food was not merely a sustenance but a critical element in the performance and communication of social identity during early modern Spain. She posits that the act of eating and the types of food consumed were deeply intertwined with the hierarchical and corporate structure of Spanish society, serving as a visible marker of inequality and social stratification. Campbell suggests that food practices, such as the preference for heavily spiced flavors and the consumption of wine over beer, were not only reflective of cultural tastes but also acted as a means to reinforce or challenge social hierarchies. The choices of food, its preparation, and consumption were deeply intertwined with expressions of status, power, and wealth. From this study we can understand the role of food in shaping the social and cultural identity of a particular group.

The Mappila community has a complex identity. They use their Malayalam cultural heritage in their daily lives and their Islamic religious heritage for the sake of faith and Muslim rituals. The historical experiences of migration of the community and their relationships with different colonial authorities too mould their identity, which explains why they are so resilient and can adapt easily. For the Mappila Muslims of South Malabar, Ramadan fasting and Nercca have played a major role in shaping their sense of communal identity. Muslims all over the world are religiously a single community, Mappilas have shared their religious practices and rituals with the Muslims of the world, although cultural differences can be seen in their lives. We can understand from history that the Mappilas grew as a community through trade relations between Malabar and Arabian regions, religious conversion and inter-caste marriage. However, the Mappilas had a way of life that was highly intermingled with the other dominant groups in the region, the Hindu community and the Christian community. The Hindu Nambutiris, who were strictly vegetarian, and the Syrian Christians, who followed a mixed diet of fish, meat, and vegetarianism, had a great influence on the food tradition of Malabar from the earliest times. The advent of colonialism had great effects on the way of life of the Mappilas in Malabar. The advent of colonialism has had a great impact on the way of life of the Mappilas. After the religious fanaticism of the Portuguese, the Mappilas lived a peaceful life in Malabar under the Samutirii and Mysorean rule. But the British occupation in the 19th and 20th centuries disrupted the daily lives of the Mappilas, and it took years for the Mappilas to overcome the hardships caused by the 36 agrarian riots in Malabar in the 19th century and the Malabar Strike of 1921. At the same time, we can see that the Mappilas became stronger as a community even during the period of revolt against colonial interventions. It can be seen that the Mappila community, living in the framework of Islam, assimilated local traditions and used them to build the community.

Food culture connected with tomb worship, nercca, birth, death, and weddings have fostered a sense of identity in the Mappila community and given them a distinct cultural identity in the 19th and 20th centuries. What people eat, how they eat, when they eat, what they cook, what tools they use for cooking, how they save cooked food, are all related to their religion, culture, geography and anthropology. Mappila Muslims of Malabar developed a specific ritual and food culture during the period of the Portuguese occupation.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan has played a big role in shaping their lives. The food cultures associated with these two traditions have played a major role in building and strengthening the Mappila communal sense of identity.

During the month of Ramadan, Mappila's food culture undergoes a major change. Fasting is a ritual that unites Mappilas with the world Muslim community. At the same time, the change in the food habits of the Mappilas during the fasting of Ramadan brings them together as a community. By abstaining from meals during the day, or by eating indoors without showing others what they are eating if they are not fasting, by organizing Iftar meals for Muslims, and by donating Fitr Zakat to the poor in the form of rice, the Mappilas express a single vision of their religion to other communities. In general, the Ramadan diet remains the same among the Mappilas. The Mappilas begin their days fast with a modest meal, typically consisting of rice, fruit, and water, consumed between four and five in the morning. Throughout the day, they refrain from eating and prepare for Iftar in the evening, which marks the end of the fast. The manner in which Mappilas observe the 30 days of Ramadan varies according to their financial means, but it often involves spending time with family at home, fasting, and praying. Food plays a significant role during Ramadan, bringing joy to those who fast. Iftar gatherings, organized by political parties, institutions, clubs, and families, serve to foster communal harmony and acquaint others with the community. The Iftar dishes are notable not only for how they are consumed, seated at a table, but also for their preparation, which is distinctive to Ramadan. These homemade dishes, along with those from local shops, are central to uniting the Mappilas as a community during this holy month.

The fast is traditionally broken with water and dates. Subsequently, Mappilas end their fast with an assortment of fruits, various fried snacks, spinach porridge, and juices, followed by the Maghrib prayer. Afterward, they reconvene at home for a second meal that includes pathiri, porotta, fried fish or meat, chicken curry, other curries, biryani, manti, and more. Following this meal, they attend the Taraweeh prayer at the mosque or pray at home. Later in the night, around 10 or 11 pm, they consume porridge and other light snacks. Thus, Ramadan brings about a significant transformation in the culinary traditions of the Mappilas. These changes are evident across all aspects of society, impacting family related customs and practices.

Fasting during Ramadan is believed to unite Muslims worldwide, creating a sense of global unity. However, the practice of Nercca seems to be a local custom. Although Saint worship is a universal practice, the Nercca observed in Malabar closely resemble the rituals of Kerala's Hindu community. Extensive research has been conducted on the role of nercca in fostering community spirit. The primary aspect of these nerccas is food distribution. Nercca food, considered sacred, has been instrumental in nurturing religious awareness, unity, and harmony among the Mappilas. From preparation to distribution, the process of serving and consuming such food after prayers is a mindful act for the Mapala community. Long queues are often seen at the distribution points for this food. Mosque related committees are commonly formed to organize and manage the distribution of nercca food. Numerous nerccas are observed in Malabar, with food distribution being a crucial ritual in each. People from all religions and castes; and even from remote places, gather to receive this food, and individuals queue up to partake in this sacred offering<sup>xxvii</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

Since the arrival of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Mappila Muslim community of South Malabar, descendants of Arab traders, have a rich history marked by the intermingling of Arab and local cultures. Their culture, particularly cuisine, was influenced by the policies of Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Malabar, who introduced new plants, dishes like Muttamala, and European eating styles. The Mappilas faced religious persecution, leading to anti-imperialist struggles, and interacted with various colonial powers and Mysorean rulers, notably Tipu Sultan. British rule in 1792 led to administrative division of Malabar and Mappila revolts against colonial interventions in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The British influence also transformed the culinary habits, introducing tiffin, snacks, and bakery products, changing the traditional ways of eating in Malabar. The Mappilas also interacted with local Hindu communities and Syrian Christian migrants, influencing their cuisine with dishes like coconut, banana, kappa, and porridge. The Gulf Boom led to a diaspora that maintains strong ties with Malabar, fostering a resurgence in traditional Mappila food both locally and abroad.

Central to the identity of Mappilas is Islam, with practices rooted in the Quran and Hadiths, and a deep reverence for spiritual leaders celebrated during Nercca

festivals. The community's ability to assimilate diverse influences while preserving its unique identity is evident in its food culture, which offers insights into its history and social fabric. The Mappila community of Malabar has a unique identity that is deeply rooted with their cultural and religious practices, particularly during the month of Ramadan. The food culture during this period, including the preparation and consumption of special dishes for Iftar, plays a significant role in reinforcing their communal bonds and distinct identity. This is a reflection of their resilience and ability to adapt, drawing from both their Kerala heritage and Islamic faith, while also being influenced by historical interactions with various colonial powers and local communities. The Mappila identity is a harmonious blend of these diverse influences, creating a rich window that defines their place in the world. Fasting during Ramadan is not only a religious observance but also a cultural one that unites the Mappila Muslims with the global Muslim community and strengthens their sense of belonging within their own community. These practices became a way for the Mappilas to maintain their distinctiveness while also engaging with the broader Malabar society.

The present study reveals that the Mappila ceremonies related with Ramdan Fasting and Nercca are enough to describe how they define themselves as individuals, groups and communities. It also says the meaning and significance of food in Mappila culture. Mappila food habits related with various ceremonies also reveal that how culture is transmitted through food. This is very clear if one goes behind the ceremonies like Nercca and Ramdan fasting. In the case of Iftar meet and nercca one can see the participation of non-Muslims which is a proof for how those practices links people of different religious communities together. It helps to understand how food catalyses solidarity within the community and how those food practices help its members build better human relationship with other communities. It also leads us to form some insights on how much differences exist between Mappila community and the rest of the society.

### **Methodology**

The study employs ethno-historical technique, with the primary goal of describing the how the food culture in the Ramadan Fasting and Nercca festival shaped the identity of Mappilas in south Malabar. Ethno historical study is a method of research that combines historical sources and ethnographic data to understand the past and present of a cultural group. The researcher used food related traditions in the Ramadan

fasting and Nercca festival among the Mappilas of south Malabar as primary research materials. These traditions were also used to collect information about the current conditions in the Mappila food culture and their identity formation. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, a study of food necessitates techniques used in anthropology, geography, and sociology, as Fillipe Armesto correctly observed in his *Near A Thousand Tables* (2001). Methodology also included reviewing relevant literature, conducting a field study, analysing and correlating the findings, and so on. Fieldwork played a crucial role in understanding the Mappila Muslim food traditions connected with Ramdan fasting and nercca. The researcher spent a significant amount of time in the field, immersing themselves in the local culture and engaging with community members. This involved visiting homes and community events to observe and document food practices, ingredients, and cooking techniques. Observations were made during community gatherings, religious festivals, and everyday meals to understand the role of food in social interactions and cultural practices. These observations helped in capturing the nuances of food preparation, serving, and consumption, as well as the rituals and traditions associated with specific dishes.

The study also used input from scholars and locals in the fields of Mappila community which were gathered through the use of the Interview method. As a result, it would validated the information gathered from other sources. Interviews were conducted with individuals from the Mappila Muslim community who possessed extensive knowledge and experience in organizing nercca and observing fasting. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for open ended discussions and the exploration of various aspects of Mappila Muslim food traditions. The insights gained from these interviews provided valuable information on recipes, food customs, and the cultural significance of food within the community.

To form the conceptual and theoretical background for the study, the scholar used an edited work "Food Studies: An Introduction to Research Methods by Jeff Miller and Jonathan Deutsch. This work serves as a primer for conducting research in the field of food studies. Likewise Massimo Montanari's "Food is Culture", K T Achaya's "Indian Food: A Historical Companion" and "At the First Table: Food and Social Identity in Early Modern Spain" by Jodi Campbell, are ground breaking in terms of methodology development.

While every effort was made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the research findings, there were certain limitations to the study. Firstly, the research focused primarily on the Mappila Muslim community in the Malabar region, and therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other regions or communities. Secondly, the study was conducted within a specific timeframe and budget, which limited the scope and depth of the research. Despite these limitations, the research methodology employed in this study provided valuable insights into the Mappila Muslim food traditions of Malabar and its impact on their communal identity. The combination of fieldwork, interviews, observations, and literature review ensured a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The findings of this research contribute to the preservation and promotion of Mappila Muslim food traditions, while also shedding light on the broader cultural and historical context of the community.

### Endnote

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