



From Spices to Swords: Portuguese Atrocities and Mappila Resistance in Colonial Malabar (1498–1583)

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical examination of the transformative and violent period in Malabar's history initiated by the Portuguese arrival in 1498. It argues that the confluence of Portuguese commercial ambition and crusading religious zeal fundamentally shattered the region's socio-economic equilibrium and communal harmony, giving rise to one of India's earliest anti-colonial resistance movements. The study focuses on the Mappila Muslims, who evolved from being the key arbiters of the Indian Ocean spice trade to becoming the primary victims of and resisters against Portuguese colonial aggression. Through a systematic campaign of economic displacement, religious desecration, and brutal violence—including the destruction of mosques, enslavement of populations, and obstruction of pilgrimage—the Portuguese catalyzed a formidable and ideologically-driven resistance. This response was intellectually framed by Mappila scholars like Sheikh Zainudhin through jihad literature, such as the seminal *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin*, which articulated the struggle as a defensive religious obligation. The defiance of local Hindu rulers, particularly the Zamorin of Calicut, who refused to exile the Mappilas, further intensified the conflict, creating a complex dynamic of local alliance against a foreign aggressor. By drawing on Mappila primary sources and colonial records, this paper concludes that the Mappila resistance, forged in this crucible of violence, represents a significant and early chapter in India's history of anti-colonial struggle, one that had profound and lasting effects on the religious, cultural, and political geography of Kerala.



Introduction

The late 15th century heralded a pivotal and violent turning point in global history, as the maritime expansion of Iberian powers fundamentally reordered the world's economic and political systems. The landing of Vasco da Gama on the coast of Kerala in 1498 was not merely a journey of geographical discovery but the opening salvo in a new, aggressive form of empire-building, one that fused unbridled commercial greed with a militant, crusading Christianity. This study delves into the devastating consequences of this encounter in the specific context of Malabar, a region renowned for its cosmopolitan ports, sophisticated maritime culture, and its control over the world's most lucrative commodity—spices.

It specifically analyzes the violent and protracted interaction between the Portuguese Estado da Índia and the indigenous Mappila Muslim community, a relationship defined by extreme atrocity and resilient resistance. Existing historiography of this period often narrates events from a colonial, top-down perspective or gets subsumed within broader narratives of Indian history. This paper, however, seeks to center the Mappila experience, drawing on their own historical texts, theological responses, and oral traditions to understand how they perceived, endured, and organized a concerted fight back against the Portuguese onslaught. It posits that the Portuguese project in Malabar was inherently dualistic: while its stated goal was economic monopoly, its methodology was explicitly genocidal towards Muslim communities, whom they viewed through a lens polished by the recent Reconquista in the Iberian Peninsula. This paper will trace the origins of the Mappila community, outline the Portuguese agenda, document the systematic atrocities committed, and analyze the intellectual and military formation of the resistance that ultimately defined this era.

The Mappilas: Origins and Pre-Portuguese Prominence

To understand the ferocity of the Portuguese-Mappila conflict, one must first appreciate the stature and integration of the Mappilas in pre-colonial Malabar. The Mappila community of Kerala embodies a long and rich history of cross-cultural exchange in the Indian Ocean world. The term 'Mappila' (a honorific meaning 'great child' or 'son-in-law') itself suggests a history of integration and respect, referring originally to the descendants of Arab traders and local Malayali women.ⁱ Strong historical and epigraphic evidence indicates that Islam was introduced to India through the Malabar coast, likely by Arab merchants as early as the 7th century CE, making the Mappilas one of the oldest continuous Muslim communities in all of South Asia.ⁱⁱ



This early presence was facilitated by a pre-existing and thriving trade relationship between the Malabar coast and the Arab world, dating back to ancient times with connections to Mesopotamia, the Oman peninsula, and later the Roman Empire.ⁱⁱⁱ Unlike later colonial powers, these Arab traders were not conquerors but merchants who became seamlessly integrated into the local feudal and economic structure. The Hindu rulers, most notably the Zamorins of Calicut, actively encouraged and protected this trade, granting concessions and special rights (*variam*) to these merchant communities because their presence significantly enhanced the kingdom's wealth, power, and prestige.^{iv} The Zamorins even presided over ceremonial events like the *Mappila Pattanam* (Mappila festival) and received a share of the revenue from the prosperous port of Pantalayani Kollam, which was predominantly Mappila-operated.^v

Consequently, the Mappilas flourished, becoming the indispensable middlemen, financiers, and navigators in the spice trade, with extensive familial and commercial links to the wider Islamic world. They were not a marginalized minority but a prosperous, influential, and politically connected community. Contemporary accounts from foreign travelers like Duarte Barbosa (early 16th century) attest to their deep-rooted presence, estimating that Muslims constituted nearly a fifth of the population in the coastal regions and were "so rooted in the soil throughout Malabar."^{vi} This era was characterized by a remarkable degree of religious pluralism and tolerance. As noted by historian K.M. Panikkar, the Mappilas had never suffered any systematic ill-treatment or persecution from their Hindu rulers prior to the Portuguese arrival.^{vii} This climate of harmony is further corroborated by Mappila intellectual leaders like Sheikh Zainudhin, who in his *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin* praised the Zamorins for their benevolence and respect for Islamic customs, noting that they "respected the customs and practices of Muslims and were friendly with them except on rare occasions."^{viii} This pre-1498 context of integration and prosperity is crucial, as it highlights the catastrophic disruption that followed.

The Portuguese Agenda: Commerce and Crusade

Portugal's arrival on the Malabar coast was driven by a clearly defined and potent dual mandate: to violently seize control of the spice trade at its source and to wage a perpetual Christian crusade against Islam. This mindset was not a secondary characteristic but a core ideology, a direct extension of the Iberian Reconquista that had recently culminated in the expulsion of Muslims from Spain and Portugal. The Portuguese court saw itself as engaged in a global holy war, and the Indian Ocean was perceived not as a neutral space of peaceful trade but as a "*Mare Muslimum*"—a Muslim lake that needed to be conquered, controlled, and purified.^{ix}



The now-famous retort by a member of Gama's crew to a Tunisian merchant in Calicut who questioned their purpose—"We have come to seek Christians and spices"—perfectly encapsulates this fusion of motives. The order of the objectives is itself revealing; the spiritual mission was often rhetorically privileged, even if commercial gain was the ultimate engine.^x Their primary enemies were identified as the Arabs and their local allies, the Mappilas, whom they indiscriminately termed *Moors*. This conflation was strategic; it denied the Mappilas their unique Indian identity and placed them within a global Islamic enemy that the Portuguese were sworn to destroy. As Sheikh Zainudhin accurately observed in *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin*, the Portuguese hostility was directed almost exclusively against Muslims and their faith, while they often collaborated with or manipulated non-Muslim groups like the Nairs.^{xi} Their strategy was multifaceted and brutal: to militarily dominate sea lanes through superior cannons and carracks, to establish a coercive monopoly by forcing local rulers to trade only with them on their terms, and to systematically dismantle the existing Arab-Mappila commercial network through a campaign of terror.

Systematic Atrocities and Economic Warfare

The Portuguese strategy quickly escalated from aggressive competition to outright state-sponsored terror. The initial encounters were marked by a fundamental clash of worldviews. The Zamorin, operating within a paradigm of open trade and equitable treatment for all merchants, refused Vasco da Gama's successor, Pedro Álvares Cabral, preferential treatment over the established Muslim traders. This refusal, a defense of the ancient principle of free trade, was interpreted by the Portuguese as an act of hostility. Cabral retaliated by attacking Muslim ships at anchor in Calicut harbor, an act of piracy that provoked a violent response from the Mappila merchants, who destroyed the Portuguese factory.^{xii} This event marked the point of no return.

Thereafter, the Portuguese unleashed a calculated campaign of violence designed to intimidate the Zamorin, break the will of the Mappila community, and establish their supremacy. Their atrocities were methodical, symbolic, and designed to inflict maximum psychological and physical damage:

- **Economic Sabotage and Piracy:** They positioned their fleets off the coast to prey on Mappila and Arab merchant ships and pilgrim vessels. These acts were not mere raids but systematic economic warfare aimed at destroying the very foundation of Mappila prosperity. Ships were plundered, burned, or captured, their crews and passengers—men, women, and children—were enslaved or slaughtered.^{xiii}



- **Religious and Cultural Desecration:** Recognizing mosques as the central pillars of community identity, social organization, and resistance, they systematically targeted them for destruction in key ports like Calicut, Pantalayani, and Ponnani. The most egregious example of this symbolic violence was the construction of a fort at Chaliyam using the stones from four deliberately demolished mosques, including the historic Juma Masjid of Naquda Mithqal.^{xiv} This was not just a practical use of building material; it was a profound act of desecration meant to demonstrate the triumph of the Cross over the Crescent. They also burned copies of the Quran, publicly trampled on Islamic texts, and dug up Muslim graves to use the tombstones in fortifications.^{xv}
- **Psychological Terror and Sexual Violence:** Contemporary Mappila accounts, such as Qazi Muhammad's *Fathh al-Mubin*, provide harrowing details of the daily humiliations and brutalities. The Portuguese would publicly spit on Muslims, force them to eat pork, and torture them for entertainment.^{xvi} They specifically targeted women, molesting them in a deliberate strategy to dishonor the community, break its social fabric, and force conversions. The kidnapping of a young Muslim girl from a coastal village, which led to the heroic martyrdom of the Mappila warrior Kunhi Marakkar, became a legendary event that served as a powerful catalyst for mass resistance.^{xvii}
- **Disruption of Pilgrimage:** In a move that struck at one of the Five Pillars of Islam, they blockaded the route to Mecca, attacking Hajj ships. The brutal burning of the *Miri*, a vessel carrying over 300 pilgrims returning from Mecca, stands as a testament to their crusading zeal. Despite the passengers offering all their wealth and the Sultan of Egypt promising shiploads of spices for their release, Vasco da Gama ordered the ship burned while women held up their infants to beg for mercy.^{xviii} This act demonstrated that religious vengeance often overrode the profit motive.

This reign of terror had two major unintended consequences: it solidified Mappila resistance into a cohesive, community-wide struggle, and, by forcing many traders and families to flee the coast for the interior hinterlands of Malabar, it facilitated the spread of Islam into new, agrarian parts of the region, altering its demographic landscape permanently.^{xix}

Ideology of Resistance: The Role of Jihad Literature

Facing an existential threat without the protection of a Muslim state, the Mappilas found unified leadership and ideological direction in their religious scholars, the ulama. The most prominent of these



were the Makhдум family of Ponnani, a town that became the intellectual and spiritual heart of the resistance, earning the title "Makkah of Malabar."^{xx} The Makhdums were not isolated clerics; they were politically engaged leaders. The Zamorin himself recognized their influence, personally visiting Sheikh Zainudhin Sr. to request the assistance of Mappila fighters against the common Portuguese enemy, formalizing a political-military alliance.^{xxi}

The most significant and enduring intellectual response to the Portuguese crisis came from Sheikh Zainudhin Makhдум II (the junior), a prolific scholar and the Qazi of Ponnani. Around 1583, he compiled *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin* (A Gift to the Holy Warriors), a work that is arguably India's first definitive anti-colonial treatise.^{xxii} It served multiple crucial purposes:

1. **A Historical Record:** It documented Portuguese crimes and atrocities in meticulous detail, serving as a testimony for contemporaries and for posterity, ensuring that the suffering would not be forgotten.
2. **An Ideological Framework:** It framed the struggle not as mere warfare or retaliation but as a defensive jihad (*jihad al-daf*). Zainudhin argued it was an obligatory religious duty (*fard al-ayn*) for every Muslim, regardless of gender, social status, or health, to repel an aggressor threatening their faith, life, honor, and property. He left no room for pacifism, stating that even the disabled must contribute in whatever way they could.^{xxiii}
3. **A Mobilization Tool:** The text was widely circulated through networks of mosques across Malabar and sent to powerful Muslim kingdoms in Turkey, Egypt, and Arabia. It was a call to arms aimed at rallying both local peasants and international political support against a common enemy.

Zainudhin's work provided a religious sanction and a powerful moral imperative for resistance. It transformed the struggle from a series of reactive, localized skirmishes into a conscious, ideologically-driven, and widespread anti-colonial movement. It gave meaning to the suffering and a divine purpose to the sacrifice, promising those who fell the status of *shaheed* (martyr), with immediate entry into paradise.

Military Resistance and the Kunjali Marakkars

The ideological call to arms issued by the ulama was answered militarily by the legendary Kunjali Marakkars. Originally a family of wealthy ship-owning Mappila merchants from Cochin and later Kayalpattanam, the Marakkars entered the service of the Zamorin of Calicut and were appointed as the



admirals (*kunjali*) of the Zamorin's navy.^{xxiv} Inspired by the preachings of the Makhdums, successive generations of the Marakkar family—iconic figures like Pattu, Mammali, Kutti Ahmed, and the most famous, Muhammad Ali—waged a relentless naval guerrilla war against the technologically superior Portuguese armada for nearly a century.^{xxv}

Their strategy was ingenious. Instead of engaging the heavy Portuguese carracks in open naval battles, they used their knowledge of the intricate coastal waters, hidden coves, and complex monsoon patterns to their advantage. They commanded fleets of lighter, more maneuverable ships (*paroes* and *pachydaes*) that could outmaneuver the European vessels. They mastered the art of boarding enemy ships, engaging in fierce hand-to-hand combat, and using fire ships to destroy Portuguese fleets at anchor.^{xxvi} They became the protectors of the Malabar coast, escorting Mappila and Indian merchant vessels safely through Portuguese blockades. Their struggle epitomized the practical application of the jihad advocated by the scholars, transforming them from admirals into legendary folk heroes within the Mappila community and symbolizing the fierce spirit of resistance. Their prolonged struggle demonstrates that the Portuguese never achieved uncontested control over the Malabar coast and were constantly harassed by this determined local force.

Conclusion

The period from 1498 to 1583 represents a profound and tragic rupture in the history of Malabar. The Portuguese arrival, driven by a unique and deadly blend of commercial avarice and crusading fanaticism, shattered the centuries-old cosmopolitanism, economic prosperity, and religious harmony of the Kerala coast. The Mappila community, once prosperous and integrated merchants, were systematically targeted for economic elimination, cultural erasure, and brutal subjugation in a campaign marked by unprecedented atrocity.

However, this campaign of terror ultimately failed to achieve its goal of pacification. Instead of being crushed, the Mappilas demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Forged in the fire of persecution, they forged a powerful and distinct resistance identity. This identity was articulated through seminal jihad literature that provided a theological and intellectual foundation for defiance, and it was enacted through a prolonged and costly military struggle that engaged the might of a global empire for decades. Their defiance, often conducted in alliance with Hindu rulers like the Zamorin who valued the old order over the new tyranny, constitutes one of the earliest and most sustained anti-colonial movements in Indian history. The Portuguese legacy in Malabar is thus not one of unchallenged mastery but of a relentless and costly conflict that they ultimately could not win. The violence they initiated left an indelible mark on the cultural



and religious landscape of Kerala, pushing Islam into the hinterlands and creating a legacy of resistance that would echo through subsequent centuries of Mappila history. The transition of the Mappilas "from spices to swords" is a story of how colonial violence begets resistance, and how a community can forge an identity of defiance in the face of attempted annihilation.

Endnotes

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