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# Tracing the Malayness of Malabaris in Malaysia: An Ethnography of their Identity and Language

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The Malabari community in Malaysia, hailing largely from Kerala, possesses a profound historical and cultural identity in their second home. The evident dearth in literature on their diaspora and related entities reveals that the personal and social narratives of this particular community are, by and large, untold, whereby their identity is least explored from an academic context. Thus, the Malabari ethnicity was explored to appreciate its assimilation into *Malayness* or a new identity as Malaysian, by seeking their perspectives on preserving the language of their homeland, and their manifestations of a dual identity in individual and public spheres. The paper specifically centers on the Malabaris, who represent a unique identity among Indian Muslims in the Malay Peninsula, distinguishing themselves from the predominant Malay Indians or Indian Malays. We begin by outlining their migration and the interpretation of their religion in relation to the Malay rulers. Then blending of two vernaculars and the cultural exchanges that occurred during their migration and survival are reconnoitered, fostering some meaningful dialogues between their historical and contemporary experiences. While the survival embodies multiple dimensions in its nature, process, and structure, the paper illustrates how they establish a sense of community through religious

and cultural activism, embracing their Malabari identity while simultaneously acknowledging their Malay heritage in other aspects. This duality results in the complexities and confusions discussed in the subsequent analysis.

**Keywords:** Malabari, Malaysia, language, identity, ethnography, Malayalam

## Introduction

In a multi-ethnic country like Malaysia, ethnic and religious identities are not merely inherited but actively exchanged within a multifaceted socio-political framework that privileges *Malayness* as the normative ideal (Shamsul, 1996; Kahn, 2006). For minority Muslim communities such as the Malabaris - descendants of migrants from the Malabar Coast of Kerala—this negotiation involves a delicate balancing act: affirming their distinct heritage while aligning with the cultural and political markers of Malay identity. Their position is further complicated by the state's ethnonationalist policies, which conflate Islam with Malay ethnicity, creating both opportunities for inclusion and pressures for assimilation (Hirschman, 1987; Nagata, 1981).

The Malabari diaspora in Malaysia emerged through waves of migration initiated in the sixth century and continued till the early twentieth century, facilitated by maritime trade, religious networks, and colonial-era labour flows (Arasaratnam, 1970). Over generations, they have contributed to the religious, economic, and cultural life of the Malay Peninsula, establishing mosques, educational institutions, and community associations that integrate them into the broader Muslim community while preserving their distinct social boundaries. Yet, their identity remains marked by a "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 1903/ 1994) of being simultaneously Malabari and Malay - a hybridity that is at once a source of resilience and a site of tension.

Within this identity negotiation, language plays a symbolically compelling role. Malayalam, as the heritage language, serves as a mnemonic link to Malabaris' ancestral homelands and a marker of intra-community solidarity (Fishman, 1991). However, its maintenance is challenged by the dominance of Malay in public life and Tamil in the broader Indian diaspora, leading to selective retention and strategic

code-switching. This linguistic adaptation mirrors the broader cultural strategy of the Malabaris: preserving core elements of their heritage while adopting aspects of Malayness that facilitate social mobility and political belonging.

The present research explored some of the possible dimensions of the Malabari identity, its entanglement, being dual in consciousness, and living with multiple languages while making connections with that of their homeland. As one of its premises, this paper postulates that Malabari identity in Malaysia is best understood as a resilient hybrid formation - one that is neither wholly assimilated nor rigidly preserved, but dynamically reconstituted through everyday practices, religious affiliations, and selective cultural adaptation. By tracing the historical trajectories, socio-political positioning, and linguistic practices of the Malabaris, the study reveals how their "entangled identity" is not merely a by-product of migration but an active, strategic response to the realities of life in a Malay-dominated nation-state. The paper starts by depicting their migration history and making sense of their religion to the Malay rulers. The assimilation of two vernaculars and the cultural exchange during their period of survival is also narrated. Nonetheless, their perceived inferior 'self' has consistently clashed with the complexities of being the 'true Malay'. Consequently, it is argued that this identity entanglement has affected the Malabari community's life, not only within social spheres but also on an individual level.

**Chronicles of the Malabari Migration to the Malay Peninsula**

The Malabari ethnicity shares a significant segment of the Indian Malay demographic, representing the second largest Indian ethnic community in Malaysia. The term "Malabari" refers to Muslims with ancestral roots in the Malabar region of Kerala (Nagarajan, 2008; Pillai, 2015; Chua et al., 2011). Their migration to Malaysia began during the British colonial era, when they played a role in recruiting Indian laborers for plantations, serving as supervisors (*Mandur*) and caretakers in oil palm estates. This migration occurred indiscriminately, driven by British administrative policies that permitted East Asians to relocate to destinations of their choice, thereby maximizing their trading

potential. As such, it was primarily for commercial endeavors with a significant role in the trade activities associated with people of the Malay Peninsula, including the present-day Indonesia and Singapore, leading to the spread of Islam in those lands. This survival journey forced many of the migrants to assimilate into the local culture, relinquishing their identity as Malabaris. meanwhile, some periodically returned to Kerala, seeking identity and heritage of their own place (Aljuneid, 2019).

From the 6th century onwards, the presence of Malabaris in Malaysia became increasingly noticeable, with South Indians from present-day Tamil Nadu and Kerala arriving at the coastal areas of Kedah for trade purposes (Arasaratnam, 1970; Hall, 2011). They also fulfilled the landlords' mercantile demands through their transnational experiences (Amrith, 2011; Sandhu, 1969). It is even more evident in the migration stories of *Marakkars*, a unique group of laborers as we see henceforth. The *Marakkar* clan, who vibrantly joined various international trade and travelled to Malaya during the 1700s, have remarkably contributed to the diaspora narratives in the Peninsula and still inhabit the region (Arasaratnam, 1986; Hussain, 2007). These resilient groups remain engaged in several industries, particularly the aromatic spice sector—a continuation of their ancestral economic specialization (Subrahmanyam, 1990; Pearson, 2015). Linguistically, the community maintained distinct identities: Tamil and Sri Lankan *Marakkars* communicated in Tamil, while those from Kerala used Malayalam, reflecting their subregional origins (Dale, 1980; Narayanan, 2013). Notably, descendants of *Marakkar* timber traders and their historical involvement in physically demanding trades like timber and spices, necessitating robust physicality, have been acknowledged by historians (Chaudhuri, 1985; Andaya, 2008). Regarding their ethnonym's origin, there are two dominant interpretations, of which the first traces "*Marakkar*" from the root word *marakkalayar* or *mara-kkapal-ukar* (people utilizing wooden ships), referring to their naval engineering expertise (Dale, 1980; Pearson, 2015), while the second connects it to the Arabic term *marqab* (watchtower), referring to the Yemeni migrants called

*Marakkalayar* who were skilful in wooden boat navigation (Narayanan, 2013; McGilvray, 2004).

While exploring further on the reminiscence of the 'about-to-lose' identity of Malabari, we visited a grandmother in Johor, the southern state of Malaysia, where Malabaris are clustered to significant numbers. Despite being in her 80s, she sharply recollected the memories of her migration and survival in a mild voice while looking afar. "*I must have reached here when I was 11 years old. My father brought me here with him. We started living here in the premises of a Rubber Estate owned by the Whites, where my father was employed. He used to wake up early in the morning at five for Rubber tapping, and I used to accompany him. He would pay me for helping him in his work.*" Evidently, this narrative exemplifies the kinship-based survival strategies and embodied cultural memory characteristics of colonial labor diasporas. Her recollection of migrating at age 11 to a British-owned rubber estate reveals how a Malabari laborer was embedded in a racialized political economy (Wolf, 1982), where colonial "Whites" (*orang putih*) leveraged hierarchical systems to extract value from marginalized communities. Her father's predawn labor (*getting up early at five to cut the Rubber Tree*) and covert wage-sharing (*He would pay me for helping him*) reflect Scott's (1985) concept of everyday resistance - subtle acts circumventing colonial control to sustain intergenerational livelihoods. Also, this retelling in her 80s underscores oral history as a site of resilience (Frisch, 1990), transforming personal trauma into collective ethnic identity. This aligns with Tsuda's (2003) observation that such memories preserve subaltern agency against erasure by state-centric histories.

**The Impact of Migration**

Generally, the Indian migration to Malaysia was positively received by both Monarchs and people as the migrants were often viewed as key players in the region's economic landscape (Tan, 2018). Among those who crossed the land before the 18$^{th}$ century were Indian traders, who brought not only goods but also some cultural sediments that enriched the everyday life of the receiving land (Khan,

2020). The Muslim emigrants enjoyed some special privileges to engage freely with the Monarchs and elite classes in Malacca, which facilitated their smooth amalgamation with the socio-political fabric of the region (Hussain, 2019). Consequently, they frequently participated in court gatherings and other significant assemblies, allowing them to forge important connections that would benefit their business endeavors. These Indian merchants adeptly demonstrated to the Malayan administration how they could enhance their economic resources, leading to a renewed favorable attitude towards the migrants (Zain, 2021). In the context of Malacca, the Muslim migrants propelled its economic progress during the reign of King Parameswara, who established a well-organized trade center in 1411. In 1424, he embraced Islam, renamed himself Sutan Megat Iskandar Shah, and married a Muslim princess from the province of Pasai. This conversion not only solidified his relationship with the Muslim community but also influenced his administrative affairs, resulting in a Mass religious conversion to Islam. (Ismail, 2022). Such instances, among many similar ones happened in other regions of the land illustrate the socio-cultural transformations brought about by Indian Muslims in the Peninsula (Chuah, Shukri, & Yeoh: 2011).

**Preserving the Language of the Homeland**

Then, the question is, what has happened to Malayalam as spoken by the Malabaris? Numerous Malabaris convey a feeling of longing for their mother tongue. While they may not possess the ability to read or write in Malayalam, the spoken language remains familiar to many Malabari households in Malaysia. Maintaining the mother tongue is a vital aspect of cultural identity, particularly for migrant communities. Malabaris are seen to be exemplifying this practice, as a significant majority among them consider preserving Malayalam, the language of their homeland, essential for sustaining their cultural heritage. Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a vessel for cultural values, traditions, and collective memory (Fishman, 1991). Despite several obstacles, including a linguistic isolation if they stick to only Malayalam, they strive to keep their heritage alive, recognizing that language is intrinsically linked to their identity. As noted by Spolsky (2004), language is a key component of

cultural identity, and its preservation is critical for the continuity of cultural practices and social cohesion within the community. Although there are exemptions, the commitment of the Malabari community to use Malayalam in their daily lives and pass it on to future generations highlights their resilience and dedication to cultural preservation (Krauss, 1992). In this respect, when they communicate in Malayalam, it goes beyond mere dialogues; it is an assertion of identity and belonging in a multicultural landscape.

It is likely due to a sense of emotion and multiple layers of feelings that this group has when they hesitate to abandon Malayalam. When we inquired about their need for the language of their homeland in a place where it has no space due to their permanent settlement in the migrant land, they responded with a counter question, '*How is it possible for us to forget our homeland?*" One of the madrasah leaders in charge of managing teaching staff was assertive when he said that the reason for recruiting *Ustads*, religious education teachers from the local *Madrasah*s of Kerala to the Malabari-led *Madrasah*s in Malaysia is not due to a lack of local scholars, but to facilitate their children with opportunities to learn using a language with emotions. Under the guidance of Dr. *Cik Gu* (alias *guru*, a common title used for teachers in *Bahasa Melayu*), Hameed, a Malabari PhD graduate of linguistics, has launched a new initiative aimed at teaching children Malayalam using local Madrasah as well as online platforms. According to him, this serves as a foundation for systematically teaching the language. Adding to that, he has also started offering certificate courses for Malabari adults to learn Malayalam, collaborating with an independent language teaching center in Kerala. Thus, preliminary efforts to strengthen the sense of being Malabari in a non-Malabari land through their own language have already commenced, intending to enhance the community's ability to read and write, so as to connect with the homeland. For this purpose, as *Cik Gu* said, some book publishing projects specifically in the Malayalam language are underway.

Nevertheless, many of them are concerned that the emotional comfort derived from such melancholy may hinder their ability to adapt to the socio-cultural environment of the guest land, potentially

preventing them from effectively utilizing the social, cultural, and political identity that such adaptation could provide (Boyd, 1989; Tsuda, 2003). Scholars have noted that prolonged emotional attachment to the homeland may result in a form of cultural stagnation, impeding migrants from engaging with the opportunities available in their new settings (Frisch, 1990; Wolf, 1982). Emotional nostalgia, while a natural psychological response to displacement, can evolve into a barrier against integration if not balanced with active participation in the host society (Amrith, 2011).

Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, whose grandfather, Iskandar Kutty, is reported to have been brought by the British to teach English to the Malays in the early 1800s, has exemplified this ideology throughout his life. In numerous public addresses, Dr. Mahathir asserted that since their families had relocated to Malaya, it was important to embrace a Malaysian identity, arguing that clinging to an Indian identity was counterproductive in the context of national unity (Mahathir, 2008). Consequently, Dr. Mahathir aligned himself with the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), a significant political force in postcolonial Malaya, ultimately becoming the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia. His leadership helped shape Malaysia's multi-ethnic political narrative, promoting policies aimed at national integration and economic modernization (Case, 1996; Funston, 2001).

Following his example, many migrants from Malabar have relinquished their original Indian identity and adopted a Malaysian socio-political consciousness. This transformation is part of a broader pattern of identity negotiation among diasporic communities, wherein second- and third-generation migrants often develop hybrid or localized identities that blend elements of ancestral culture with the norms and expectations of their host society (Hall, 2011; Andaya, 2008). These changes are not merely symbolic; they also reflect pragmatic strategies for achieving social mobility, political participation, and cultural legitimacy in the host country (Scott, 1985; Pearson, 2015).

Abu Bakar and his family, including his wife and three children whose ancestry hails from Tirur of Malappuram, Kerala, appeared to

us as the perfect living example of the mentioned relinquishment of the Malabari identity. They maintain no significant ties with the broader Malabari community or its *Madrasas* beyond their immediate family. Indeed, such connections have never been perceived as necessary for them. While most who preserve such an identity do so through parental insistence on attending Malabari *Madrasas* for primary religious education and participating in communal rituals, neither Abu Bakar nor his children have received the Malabari *Madrasah* education. When Abu Bakr's younger daughter was asked about her Malabari identity, she responded wryly: *"Well, I'm practically a murtad* (*apostate*) *from Malabari identity, aren't I?"* This Gen-Z descendant expressed profound grievances: her rejection of this identity stems partly from the Malay majority's persistent perception of her as Indian rather than Malaysian. She admitted that among her Malay friends, she must constantly position herself as 'true Malay', rather than an Indian or Malabari - a label she fears may exclude her from their social circles.

However, there is a big scope for an academician to be sceptical about whether such racialized narratives of marginalization are somewhat exaggerated. One might reasonably conclude that the non-Malay youth internalize these notions of inferiority precisely because their lived realities offer limited frameworks to recognize or correct such biases. Furthermore, this reflects historical patterns of Malay hegemony (*ketuanan Melayu*) and its consequent construction of societal consciousness regarding "otherness."

As for the linguistic heritage resulting from the Malabari migration to the guest land, it has remarkably contributed to the development of Bahasa Melayu by adding vocabulary to it. Same as the Bahasa adapted words from Arabic, English, Chinese, Persian, and Sanskrit, it has tremendously included Malayalam usages within. For instance, 19 distinct types of ships from the Malabar coast to Malaysia, with Malays adopting their Malayalam names and integrating them into their lingua franca (Hussain, 2007; Zoraini, 2019). Examples include *pathemari* (Malayalam: pâmhemâri), *kappal* (ship), *sampan* (small boat), *parav* (sailboat), and *sambu* (fishing vessel)- all retaining their original phonology and semantics (Arun, 2014; Nair, 2020).

Furthermore, Sanskrit terms such as *sree* (úrî, "prosperity"), *puthra*/*puthri* (putra/putrî, "son/daughter"), *raja* (râja, "king"), *ashrama* (âúrama, "hermitage"), *samudra* (samudra, "ocean"), and *kanjana* (kanyâ, "maiden") were assimilated without phonological or linguistic modifications (Collins, 2017; Asmah, 2015), illustrating a process of direct lexical incorporation (Adelaar, 2011).

**A Little about their Present**

From the very beginning, Malabaris of Malaysia fostered a shared consciousness as a migratory community (Osman, 2016, p. 89) to preserve their language and cultural identity against assimilation pressures (Pillai, 2020). Consequently, several religious and cultural associations were established under their collective effort—such as *Malabar Muslim Jama'at*, *Masai Muslim Jama'at*, and *Jemaah Muslim Negeri Johor*—serving as "ethnic enclaves" (Hussin, 2014, p. 112) for cultural reproduction. The primary impetus for these foundations stemmed from a profound sense of structural alienation in colonial Malaya, where South Indian Muslims faced or felt excluded from Malay-dominated institutions (Arasaratnam, 1970; Hussin, 2014). Essentially, a sense of 'people of the same homeland' united, to an extent, each migrant arriving in search of livelihood (Pillai, 2020), forging a diasporic kinship (Osman, 2016) that transcended caste or regional sub-groups.

Their collective consciousness proved strategically beneficial, enabling survival mutualism (Kivisto, 2014, p. 63). As documented in association archives, these groups initially focused on welfare—securing jobs, housing, and religious services for new arrivals (*Malabar Muslim Jama'at*, 1932/2018). Over time, their activities broadened to include *Madrasah* education, legal aid, and political advocacy (Hussin, 2014), reflecting institutional completeness (Breton, 1964). While some associations became defunct due to declining migration, others like *Jama'ah Muslim Negeri Johor* thrived by adapting to post-independence realities, including hosting heritage festivals and digital archiving (Pillai, 2020).

Hence, all these associations serve as vehicles for the expression of identity, while their primary focus is on the welfare

initiatives of Malabaris. Other than those in Johor, there exist some groups in Malacca and Penang with similar goals. Arguably, once these community groups start operating in a cohesive and unified way, Malabaris in Malaya are likely to achieve significant social and cultural advancements, given that their leading authorities act promptly with clear visions. All major political parties functioning in Malaysia have a history steeped in racial traditions. The 'true Malays', Chinese, and Indians each have their own political viewpoints rooted in their respective racial identities, with their languages playing a vital role in reinforcing their political ideologies. Consequently, everyone in Malaysia expresses their own identity and environment within the same sociometric framework. The social and individual consciousness regarding this issue is internalized within the community through available channels. Bearing this in mind, a Malabari is tasked with the significant challenge of overcoming his perceived identity crisis through political mechanisms.

**Conclusion**

The historical trajectory of the Malabar Muslim diaspora in Malaysia is illustrative of the multifaceted nature of diasporic identity. Far from being a stagnant or inherited trait, identity within this community has undergone continuous negotiation, shaped by emotional memory, evolving political landscapes, and the imperatives of social integration. While nostalgia for the homeland and cultural lineage offers a sense of rootedness, it may also, paradoxically, delay deeper engagement with the socio-cultural fabric of the host nation. This emotional duality has defined much of the early diasporic experience, wherein comfort in familiarity had to be reconciled with the demands of adaptation.

While the life and philosophy of some Malabaris offer a profound sense of intentional identity realignment, arguing that diasporic communities must embrace a Malaysian identity, rather than remain tied to an ancestral past, there are a significant number of others who are keen to maintain their identity as Malabaris, and make their home lingua franca alive in all senses. As for those in the former category, their transformation was neither rapid nor without resistance. The

community's integration was mediated by language, religion, and institutional participation. Over time, the adoption of the Malay language, access to national education, and participation in local religious networks enabled a gradual internalization of Malaysian national identity. Yet, remnants of cultural memory remained - in cuisine, family narratives, and subtle linguistic traces - reflecting a selective retention rather than wholesale abandonment of heritage.

Evidently, the case of the Malabar Muslims suggests a more nuanced dynamic, one in which selective adaptation, contextual pragmatism, and identity fluidity coexist. The idea of 'diasporic consciousness'—as proposed in migration studies—captures this well: a mode of being that is neither wholly embedded in the homeland nor entirely dissolved into the host society. Instead, it thrives in the interstices, navigating hybridity with both discomfort and agency. Also, the role of institutions—mosques, madrasahs, community associations—cannot be overstated. These spaces served as both preservers of identity and facilitators of transition. They enabled the community to retain moral and spiritual anchors while engaging with broader national discourses. As such, the transformation of Malabar Muslim identity in Malaysia is not a tale of erasure, but one of re-articulation.

In conclusion, the experience of the Malabar Muslim diaspora stands as a testament to the human capacity for adaptive belonging. It reveals how cultural memory and political consciousness interact to produce identities that are historically grounded yet forward-looking. In a time when global migration continues to redefine the meaning of nationhood and belonging, the Malaysian Malabar Muslim experience offers valuable insights into how diasporic communities can contribute to national life without surrendering the richness of their origins.

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