

Men, Women and Matriliney: The case of *Arakkal Swaroopam*, Malabar

Muhammad Sirajudin K.

Doctoral Fellow

Department of History

Farook College, Kozhikode, Kerala

E-mail: sirajkarimbam@gmail.com

Abstract

*Till the middle of 20th century, Kerala, the southern state of India, had resembled a matrilineal museum where almost all the major caste and ethnic groups including the Brahmins were very much keen on adhering to this particular kinship standard. It is true that many of these groups, by now have abandoned matriliney to embrace patrilineal familial structure. The most crucial factor behind this transformation was the structural changes materialized in the socio-economic milieu of the state as a result of colonial intervention. The transformation from matrilineal to patrilineal norms have well been normalized and legalized through subsequent legislative exertions and the literary rhetoric praising patriliney as the order of modern times. However, in Kerala there still exist groups like Muslims of coastal Malabar who are particularly obstinate in following the matrilineal kinship pattern notwithstanding the modernists' crusade against it. The continuing persistence on matrilineal kinship norms and matrilocal residence pattern being displayed by the Mappilas of North Malabar warrants a historical analysis of the circumstances leading to the evolution of matriliney among them. This paper precisely aims at the same by throwing light on the facets of Mappila social formation as the intermediaries of trade. An attempt is also made to unearth the exact nature of power relations existed within Mappila matriliney by taking the case of *Arakkal Swaroopam*, the lone Muslim principality of pre-modern Kerala. These merchant-monarchs were known in history for their distinctly peculiar form of matrilineal inheritance that does not exclude women from attaining the highest position in the ruling hierarchy.*

Keywords: Matriliney, maritime, swaroopam, Beebi, musnad, mooppumura.

Introduction

Arakkal Swaroopam, with its headquarters at the historic port town of Cannanore is the lone Muslim ruling family amongst innumer-

able medieval principalities of the south western coast of India now included in the state of Kerala. The dynasty had attained substantial significance in the history of the region all through the heydays of its existence, stretching over a sufficiently longer period from mid 16th to the dawn of 20th centuries. Their prominence owes greatly to a variety of factors such as the affluence gathered from maritime trade centering the port at Cannanore, the control they had exerted upon Laccadives and their pendulous relations with the Dutch and the English mercantile powers. However, the most striking feature of these merchant-monarchs was their distinctly peculiar form of matrilineal inheritance that does not exclude women from attaining the highest position in the ruling hierarchy. Although, all the *swaroopams* or ruling families of pre-modern Kerala had generally followed the matrilineal norms of inheritance, nowhere else could women be seen considered for *muppumura* (seniority) so as to make them eligible to attain the *sthanam* or position of the head of the house. In other words, contrary to the general pattern of inheritance existed in Hindu ruling families of the region, here, in *Arakkal swaroopam* the eldest member of the family was entitled to get the highest *sthanam* irrespective of their gender. Hence, there was male *Adhi Raja* and female *Adhi Raja Beebi* in this family who had been elevated to the highest monarchical position solely on the basis of their seniority. This distinctiveness prompted a general postulation that some sort of gender equity had existed within the power structure of the dynasty. Nevertheless, a close analysis of customs and practices of the house would reveal that the particularly unique status accorded to women strata of the house was neither absolute nor unchallenged. During the second half of 19th century, the house witnessed a protracted dispute between the male and female contenders to the throne in which the British authorities were invited to play the role of an arbitrator. The details of this particular conflict would be of immense use in providing an insightful analysis of the exact nature of power relations existed in the matrilineal setting of these maritime monarchs.

The Conflict

The episode of conflict formally began in 1862 when on 6th September, Abdurahiman Ali *Adhi Raja*, refused to hand over the key of the apartment containing certain utensils required for conducting an important religious ceremony, to *Adhi Raja Beebi*, the reigning queen of the house. *Adhi Raja* opposed her accession to the throne made in the same year following the demise of his mother Ayishabi *Adhi Raja Beebi* who ruled for a period of 24 years from 1838 to 1862. This re-

bellious act on the part of *Adhi Raja* who was an influential claimant for the prestigious post of Raja, though denied eventually, attained alarming proportions and the Joint Magistrate of Cannanore invited G.A. Ballard, Collector of Malabar to intervene in the matter so as to find an amicable solution for the problem. Ballard's letter dated 9th September 1862 addressed to Pycroft, the chief secretary to Madras Government provides detailed information regarding this explicit conflict between Raja and *Beebi* for attaining power. His description of events goes like this:

I should mention that Ali Raja claimed as a right to be a principal actor in the ceremony of the evening in the *Beebi's* palace.....and on several others of the same character shortly to follow. The *Beebi* refused altogether to bear him at her palace; and considering how aggravating his conduct has been to her, this is not to be wondered at.

On arrival at Cannanore, I immediately wrote to the *Beebi* and Ali Raja warning them that I should hold them responsible if there were any breach of the peace. I told Ali Raja that he was on no account to interfere with the ceremony at the *Beebi's* unless with her full consent. They both disclaimed any wish to disturb the peace, and all passed off perfectly quietly.

I called a meeting yesterday of the principal Mahommedan inhabitants at which I requested the Agents of the *Beebi*; and Ali Raja himself to be present...as it was very necessary to make a distinct settlement for the time, I told Ali Raja and the people present that the recognition of the *Beebi* as head of house was distinct; that she must manage affairs through whom she pleased as long as she did so in orderly manner; that Ali Rajah would be treated with courtesy as a Native gentleman as long as he conducted himself quietly, but that he had no official position nor right to interfere in affairs of State (so to speak) unless at the *Beebi's* desire,...". (As quoted in the Proceedings dated 23rd September 1862 of the Madras Govt.)¹.

As could be ascertained from the excerpt, initial response from British officials in the wake of emerging power conflict involving the two, was definitely one favouring *Beebi* over Ali Raja. It seems that the British authorities were overwhelmed by the fact that ever since the British Government had connection with the family of Cannanore, the succession to *musnad*² was in the female line, or in other words all who reigned since were *Beebis*. When the East India Company first entered into a treaty with the house in 1796 the *musnad* was adorned by *Valia*

Beebi (Big Queen) and she was followed only by female successors uninterruptedly up to 1862. In the letter dated 10th September 1863 addressed to the Chief Secretary, Fort Saint George, Madras, G.A. Ballard, the Collector of Malabar has openly confessed that he perhaps mistook the opinions expressed by his predecessors and was certainly unduly influenced by the fact that their original treaty had been entered into with a *Beebi* and *Beebis* only had succeeded since. The Collector also tries to explain his failure in realizing the situation on the ground that he was then new to Malabar and had found the present *Beebi* installed. Further, they might have mistaken the peculiar version of *marumakkathayam*³ prevalent in the house as some kind of female dominance echoing probably, the narration of Buchanan who crosses all the limits while praising the female predominance of the house (Buchanan, 1807). The initial acceptance of the *Beebi* as the legal heir apparent of the highest *sthanam* (position) was duly upheld and ratified as “judicious and proper” by the Chief Secretary, Madras Government⁴.

But things soon turned upside down and the British eventually took a U-turn favouring Ali Raja. The settlement upholding the claim put forward by Ali Raja was the ultimate outcome of a series of correspondence involving the *Beebi*, the Raja and the British. After a thorough enquiry and examination of the precedents and customs prevalent in the family, conducted in response to the memorandum submitted by Ali Raja, the British finally decided to resolve the dispute in following terms:

... the Governor in Council is of the opinion that Ali Rajah should be recognized as Rajah of Cannanore and should be placed in possession of the properties belonging to the House of Cannanore both in the Laccadives and on the Continent of India”. This final order was issued on the ground that there is nothing whatever to show that the succession of females since the British connection with Cannanore was due to the absence of senior male members and that on the late *Beebi*'s death there were no grounds as far as any established rule of succession in the family is concerned, to set aside Ali Rajah and declare the present *Beebi* head of the House of Cannanore. (Order No. 311 dated 12th October 1863).

This change of position was neither strange nor inexplicable considering the soundness of arguments put forward by Ali Rajah supporting his claim over the throne. By all means, the earlier stand of the British Government upholding the claim of *Beebi* seems to have been derived out of a misconception regarding the norms of inheritance of

the House, caused out of the installation of *Beebi*, probably as the end result of an intrigue, immediately following the demise of Ayishabi *Adhi Raja Beebi* in 1862. It was this mistake that they had put right in the very next chance. In fact, the British had left with no other choice but to rectify the erroneous decision taken earlier and to reinstate Ali Rajah who was the eldest of both male and female members of the family and was senior to *Beebi*, his rival by many years. As an arbitrator the British authorities thoroughly examined the claims and arguments of both parties involved in the dispute. The British finalized their ultimate verdict fully accepting all the grounds pointed out by Ali Raja in his memorial dated 16th December 1862 addressed to the Governor of Madras. His main arguments could be summarized as follows:

Ever since the demise of the preceding ruler *Adhi Raja Ayisha Beebi*, in 1862 the succession to *musnad* is in dispute. The memorialist is her son and the eldest member of the family, and the one now recognized as the successor of memorialist's mother is the great granddaughter of her niece and is his junior by many years. The peculiar custom of *marumakkathayam* as applicable to all the Muslim families of North Malabar does not deprive a male of the right of succession. There exists no evidence or an instance to show that there is any peculiar custom in the family so as to exclude male members altogether from the line of heirs. The fact that the succession to the *musnad* had been in female line since the *Valia Beebi* (literally, the big queen; refers to *Adhi Raja Joonumma Beebi* who ruled for a long period of 42 years from 1777 to 1819) who in 1796 had entered into a treaty with English East India Company is merely accidental; having arisen from the circumstances that during the preceding 67 years succession fell to the females only because there were no male senior to them at the time of accession. Ali Raja also submitted a list containing the names of all the previous rulers of the family to prove that there were many male rulers and even the founder of the House was a male. In the light of all these grounds that appear to be sound and solid, there is no room for getting surprised over the decision taken by the British. What they did is the bestowing of the throne of Cannanore to its legitimate heir.

Thus, the dispute for power was ended amicably for a while with the timely diplomatic intervention of the British. Rather than digging deep into the nature and outcome of the dispute, the need of the hour is to historicize this interesting episode of clash. Hopefully, such an attempt would be instrumental in widening our understanding of the working of matrilineal system in the live world of north Malabar

Muslims as a whole and that of the *Arakkal* family in particular. The starting point of any such attempt is, undoubtedly, an in-depth analysis of the circumstances that might have led to the adoption of matrilineal form of succession by the Mappilas of coastal Malabar, challenging the norms sanctioned in scriptures as well as the general pattern of inheritance practiced by their religious counterparts across the globe.

Matrilineal Mappilas

To begin with, the matrilineal norms of succession prevailed in *Arakkal swaroopam* is, in no way, a concession or prerogative accorded to these merchant kings. Instead, it is the common form of inheritance practiced by the Mappilas of coastal Malabar. In fact, the south west coast of India could be described as a museum of matrilineal kinship groups with several communities like the *Nairs*, the Payyannur Namboodiris, the Mappilas and Thiyyas following this particular system of inheritance. However, in quite contrast to the overabundance of literature on Nair matrilineal system available in both fictional and non-fictional varieties, the matrilineal norms of inheritance of the Mappilas of North Malabar still remains relatively unexplored despite their overwhelming demographic concentration in the region.

It is very interesting to see that Mappilas of North Malabar still follow matrilineal kinship norms in strict contrast to their own religious counterparts in the south as well as their matrilineal cousins, like the *Nairs* and Thiyyas in the north who have completely abandoned matrilineal system of inheritance by the dawn of modernity in Kerala. It is also to be noted that this persistency on matrilineal norms was achieved all through the forgone centuries surviving the stiff reservations and opposition from different corners. Shaikh Zainuddeen, the great scholar of Sunni Islam had criticized matriliney as a Hindu practice “crept into most families of the Muslim community in Kannur and the neighbouring places”. To him, it looks rather strange and surprising that the custom prevails among the Kannur Muslims, in spite of being well versed in Quran and religious learning. (Makhdam, 2006) Astonishingly, to Shaikh Zainuddeen matriliney among Malabar Muslims was only an aberration confined to Kannur region and he was silent on the matrilineal norms of succession practiced by certain reputed Muslim *tharavadus* (joint families) at Ponnani, his own place of residence. Since alleging subjectivity and suppression of unpleasant facts seems irrational in the case of Shaikh Zainuddeen, this presumably suggests a southward transition of matriliney from Kannur coast to Ponnani, of course, at a later stage. The later acceptance of matriliney by the Muslim

elites in Ponnani might be because of their enthusiasm for modeling their lives as per the standards set by *Arakkal* royal family who by then had established themselves as an influential group of highly enviable business magnets. Discussing the origin of matriliney in Kalpeni Island, Leela Dube reasonably assumes that "...centuries ago a matrilineal system, with the residence pattern, was brought to the Laccadives by the migrants from the coastal region of Kerala' (Dube, 1969: 77). The presence of certain influential Mappila Muslim families in coastal towns of south Malabar such as Tirur, and Parappananghadi is also pointing towards the southward movement of matrilineal kinship pattern. (Varma, 2004: 325)

In the early decades of 20th century, Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangam, which spearheaded the cause of reformism in Keralite Islam, was also equally hostile towards matriliney and had included it in the long list of evil innovations to be discarded, along with *shirk*, the big sin. (Ashraf, 1998: 21). In short, by 1920s, matriliney began to be referred as 'un-Islamic' in the discourses of the courts, reform movements, and Mappila youngsters who received Western education (Manaf, 2014). In spite of all these criticisms and also in the midst of the structural changes that occurred in the realm of familial relationships surfaced as a result of the restructuring of economy through colonial intervention, the Mappilas of north Malabar were very much keen on keeping the system of matriliney intact, unabatedly till the present. Further, as mentioned above, they might have influenced other Islamic groups settled in nearby islands and coastal region with which they had maintained contacts, to embrace matrilineal norms by providing themselves, an example of being Islamic and matrilineal at once.

Matriliney with a Difference

The general tendency among scholars is to relate the origin of matrilineal kinship norms to polyandry and sexual anarchy. In two separate studies published in 19th century, Bachofen (1861), the Swiss scholar and John F McLennan, (1865) an American legal expert attributes the origin of matrilineal families to a loose kind of morality and sexual anarchy manifested in the form of polyandry. Morgan and Engels have theorized that the matrilineal system was the common basis of inheritance and succession in the early stages of human history and patriarchal system evolved only at a later stage. As per Engelsian dialect, it was the origin of private property and the resultant male dominance in society that had necessitated the insistence on female chastity leading to the evolution of patrilineal system (Engels, 1886).

In the same way, the travelogues written in the context of early modern Kerala tries to relate Nair matriline with polyandry. Many of the travelogues dealing with social life of the Nair kingdoms in medieval Kerala are filled with stories of apparently lucrative type of sexual relationships. Unsurprisingly, to the catholic mindset of European travelers, these stories appeared to be horrible and provocative. Linschoten, a 17th century Dutch traveler describes *Nairs* as the most lecherous and unchaste group in which women had a series of lovers (Burnnell, 1885). He was actually endorsing what Duarte Barbosa had said in the preceding century. Barbosa's portrayal of Nair women reads thus:

[they] do no business, eat the bread of idleness, and only get their food to eat by means of their bodies: because besides each one having three or four men who provide for them, they do not refuse themselves to any braman or nayr who pays them. They are very clean and well dressed women and they hold it in great honour to know how to please men. They have a belief amongst them that the woman who dies a virgin does not go to paradise. (Dames, 1921).

These references definitely point towards the existence of a loose kind of marital relationships marked by the presence of unlimited male companions and it seems quite logical to relate the same with the origin of Nair matriline. This was precisely what Thevenot, the 18th century French traveler did when he explains:

“the Son Inherits not after his Father, because a Woman is allowed by the custom to live with several Men, so that it cannot be known who is the Father of the child she brings forth; and for Successions, the Child of the Sister is preferred , because there is no doubt of the Line by the female”²⁵.

But, the linking of matriline with polyandry and sexual anarchy seems irrational and indigestible when it comes to its Mappila version for there is absolutely no room for polyandry in Islamic familial system. Although, the rules of marriage in Islam are very simple, liberal and there do exist plenty of chances for somewhat easy divorce, remarriage and polygamy, it never permits or foresees a situation where a woman is engaged to more than one person as husband at a time. Such relationships are extremely forbidden as '*zina*' (adultery), a grotesque sin within the framework of Islamic morality. There are absolutely no contemporary references to the existence of polyandry or a loose type of morality among the Mappilas of Malabar, neither in indigenous nor in foreign accounts. Even Shaikh Zainuddeen, who is harshly critical

of the practicing of matriliney by the Mappilas of Kannur, does not find fault with their moral standards. Instead, he actually vouches their piety and religious leaning. What baffled him most is the paradox that they are still practicing matriliney in spite of being religiously proficient and pious (Makhdum, 2006:40).

The strict insistence upon the observance of '*iddah*', the formal procedure prescribed for widows and divorced women as per Islamic jurisprudence, is also of particular relevance in this context. As per this custom, girls/women are required to go through a stipulated period of observation before remarriage, in order to ascertain whether she was conceived from her late / previous husband or not. The adherence on *iddah* simply reveals that Islamic jurisprudence is invariably keen on avoiding even the least possible chances of births with dubious fatherhood. As such, in quite contrast to the context of Nair polyandry, in Muslim familial system it is rather unlikely to have births with uncertain parentage compelling the tracing of inheritance through mothers' line. Thus, there is absolutely no point in linking Mappila matriliney with polyandry leading to the birth of children with uncertain parent-hood.

Therefore, it is quite necessary to turn towards some other directions seeking a reasonable explanation for the emergence and continuity of matriliney among the Mappilas of Malabar. Here, two major factors - of course interrelated, are to be considered seriously. First and foremost is the geographical peculiarity of the region that proved instrumental in carving out its own regional identity as one of the major trade hubs of Indian Ocean world. The second factor is the prolonged nature of maritime trade of which the Arabs were the key-players. All the scholars who have attempted an analysis of Mappila social formation have established that it owes greatly to the emergence of Islamic trade network across Indian Ocean world. These trade networks that had attained substantial momentum after 9th century owing to the rise and spread of Islam, led to the emergence of Muslim trading settlements in different parts of South and South East Asia. Malabar, a coastal belt in the south western part of India providing easy access to its spice producing surroundings is the most prominent among such trading hubs. It always remained as the major attraction of Arab traders. These contacts resulted in the emergence of a network local Islamic trading communities in South Asian harbor towns through the twin processes of religious conversions and inter-caste marriages. As Burjor Avari says
in the heyday of Arab/Muslim control of the Indian Ocean, a flourish-

ing and sophisticated trade network developed in Malabar, the Keralan coast and Sri Lanka.The Muslims, both Arab and Persian, were also able to establish their respective coastal settlements. A large number of South Indian Muslims in particular trace their descent from the *Hadramauti* Arabs of south Arabia. The custom, popular among the Arabian tribes there, of arranging ‘temporary marriages’, or the *mut’a*, facilitated the increase in the Muslim population in Malabar, because many of the Arab sailors married the women from the marginalized caste of Hindu fisher-folk. The offsprings, though brought up as Muslims, stayed with their mothers in conformity with the matriarchy of Keralan society (Avari, 2013: 19).

Binu John (2011) has also pointed out *mut’a* or temporary marriages as a contributing factor behind the demographic concentration of the Mappila Muslims on the Malabar Coast. Certainly, the marriages solemnized between Arab merchants and indigenous women were a social phenomenon commonly noticeable in coastal Malabar of the medieval times. Most of the scholars including R.E.Miller relate the genesis of *Mappila* community of Malabar with this sort of inter-caste marriages. Miller affirmatively upholds this view and depicts the Arabs as “the progenitors of the *Mappilas*” by quoting Hamid Ali (Miller, 1976: 42). Comparatively liberal and affordably simple norms of marriage in Islam as well as the prolonged nature of maritime trading activities may naturally have accelerated the rate of such inter-caste marriages in the coast of Malabar. Islam always advised its followers to get into wedlock so as to keep themselves aloof from *Zina* or adultery, one of the seven big sins. However, it is unwise to brand all these marriages as *mut’a* since it was the *Shiites*, whose influence in the Malabar Coast was negligibly minimal at all points of time, were the known practitioners of such temporary marriages seeking pleasure. By all means, the marriages solemnized between Arab merchants and indigenous women in Malabar Coast were of semi-permanent nature if not fully permanent. The following excerpt taken from Barbosa’s description of Malabar Coast also reveals the permanent character of these Indo-Arab wedlocks.

There were other foreign Moors in Calicut, whom they call Pardesy. These are Arabs, Persians, Guzarates, Khorasanys, and Decanys: they are great merchants, and possess in this place wives and children, and ships for sailing to all parts with all kinds of goods. They have among them a Moorish governor who rules over and chastises them, without the king meddling with them. And before the King of

Portugal discovered the country they were so numerous and powerful in the city of Calicut, that the gentiles [Nair Knights] did not venture to dispute with them (Dames, 1921:133).

Presumably, the reference about *pardesy Moors* in the above passage is a clear indication of the presence and prominence of Arab Muslim communities like the *Baramis*, *Hadramis* and *Ba-alavis* in the region. Anyhow, it is obvious that this type of prominence is unimaginable for a group of foreigners, if they remained merely as pleasure seekers. For this Non-Resident Arab husbands, it was impossible to bring their partners into their distant homes in the desert or to provide them accommodation in this alien land. Naturally, they had left with no other options but to accept matrilocal residence pattern. Again, as the male members of the family had to abstain from home for larger intervals because of the very nature of their maritime profession, their women who remained in their own houses along with their children might have gradually begun taking charge of domestic responsibilities. Thus, the matriliney among the Mappilas of north Malabar with its characteristic feature of matrilocal residence pattern must have evolved as a matter of practicality originated out of the marital relationship between West Asian traders and indigenous women in the context of maritime profession.

Matriliney in *Arakkal Swaroopam*

The emergence of *Arakkal* royal family was essentially the culmination of increasing supremacy of Mappilas, the indigenous Muslim trading community of the Malabar Coast. Naturally, the house might have chosen matrilineal norms of succession in conformity with the norms practiced by their brethren of the same faith residing in the region. Actually, the question of ‘choosing matrilineal norms by *Arakkal* family’ itself sounds absurd as it was the system to which they were born and brought up. Moreover, matrilineal inheritance was the norm prevalent in all other pre-modern principalities of the region including Kolathunadu, from which they had been parted off. Hence, accepting matriliney was the natural choice of the house in the context of their maritime profession and also in terms of their socio-religious milieu.

Interestingly, a detailed analysis of one of the legends associated with the origin of *Arakkal* Royal house would provide some clue towards understanding and explaining the adoption of matrilineal norms within the family. As in the case of other medieval principalities of the region, the origin of *Arakkal* dynasty is also shrouded in obscurity barring some fanciful legends narrated in certain traditional accounts

like *Keralolpathy*. The first occurrence of such legends can be traced in *Keralolpathi*, describing the traditional history regarding the origin of Kerala. As per the tradition revealed in this, a *Jonaka* (foreigner/Muslim) male and a female were invited to Cannanore from *Velapuram* or *Aryapuram* and the male was given the title, the *Azhi Raja* or the lord of the sea by the last *Chera* ruler. The Dutch sources points towards another version of the story which tries to depict the dynasty as an offshoot of *kolathiri swaroopam*. As per this version, a princess of the *kolathiri* house was given in wedlock to a rich Arabian Moor to cover up disgrace and this Moor was treated much as head of the Moors of that kingdom. William Logan in his *Malabar Manuel* narrates a totally different story and attributes the origin of *Arakkal* Royal family to the conversion of *Arayankulangara Nair*, one of the ministers of *kolathiri*. There does exist certain other less popular versions of the story that are also seen embedded in the fables of romance and the resultant inter-caste marriage of a Muslim male with a Hindu woman.

The family records of the dynasty relate its origin to the legend constructed around the theme of conversion of *Cheraman Perumal* into Islam. As per this version, *Sreedevi*, the sister of the *Chera* Emperor residing at *Dharmapattanam* was asked to crown her son Mahabali after the emperor's conversion and departure to Mecca. This nephew of the *Perumal* was also converted to Islam and accepted a new name, Muhammed Ali. As the first Muslim ruler, he accepted the title of *Adhi Raja* meaning the earliest king (Kurup, 1975: 99-100).

The principal motive behind the coining of such stories is obviously, the enthusiasm for stressing the religious identity of the newly established regime. Myths regarding the origin of ruling dynasties are very common in all parts of India. Most of such myths, as has been established, were deliberately invented or used by respective dynasties to cater the needs of legitimacy and popular support. Apparently, the claim of linkage with the lineage of the last *perumal* had been definitely aimed at fostering the twin pillars of their identity-religion and politics. When judged from the matrilineal perspective, even more interesting is the attempt to link the origin of the dynasty with *Sreedevi*, the sister of *Cheraman Perumal* demonstrating the succession through female line. By all means, it may presumably be a calculated attempt to seek justification for the peculiar kind of matrilineal system of inheritance practiced by them. Genevieve Bouchon suggests a manipulation of the *Cheraman* legend by the Ali Rajas and alleges that "by the end of the eighteenth century the Islamic community of Cannanore had suc-

ceeded in bending it [the legend] in its favour.” (Bouchon, 1988:25). Notwithstanding the variations visible in different versions, the core of the legend is seen centering around two common factors –conversion to Islam and inter-caste marriage. As mentioned earlier, it was the inter-caste marriage between west Asian traders and indigenous women and the resulting matrilineal residence system that acted as the pivotal factor behind the emergence of Mappila matriliney.

Men, Women and Matriliney

The course and events of the aforesaid conflict kept aside, it is the arguments and counter arguments of the male and female contenders to the post that makes the entire episode truly captivating. Their claims and counter claims definitely warrant some serious reservations about the exact nature of status enjoyed by the women of this ruling family in spite of the presence of a good number of female monarchs in the line. Going through the revelations made by Ali Raja, reiterating his claim over the post one could easily realise the basic fact that women rulers of the family never enjoyed absolute parity with their male counter parts. The following extract from the memorial of Ali Raja would put it in unambiguous terms:

The inscription on the great seal of the State is in honor of this individual's (founder of the dynasty) “Sultan Ali Rajah,” and the old coins issued from the Mint of the Cannanore Rajahs' have all the same inscription on them. These coins may be found all over the country. But this is not all, - all the peon's badges bear the above inscription and all the title deeds of properties are under the signatures of the male members of the family⁶.

Moreover, the lack of absolute parity had also been endorsed by a statement of Ayishabi *Adhi Raja* who ruled the kingdom from 1838 to 1862. In a letter wrote in 1847 addressed to Chatfield, the Joint Magistrate, she puts it plainly that “the senior member of the family was always recognized as the head or reigning Rajah, and if the senior be a female the affairs are managed by the next junior male, though she is recognized as the *Beebi* Rajah; but if the senior be a male, he is recognized as the Sultan Ali Rajah and manages the affairs of the State without the interference of anyone'. The reference here, about “next junior male” is definitely pointing towards the major constraints of the female monarchs of the house that they were invariably lacking public space and social mobility. It clearly shows that the assistance of a ‘next junior male’ was inevitable to discharge their duties effectively, even in this much celebrated matrilineal setting. It is true that there do ex-

ist some ground for condoning these limitations-the absence of public space and the problem of mobility- in the overall context of Muslim women in 19th century north Malabar. However, the omission of the names of Beebis from the Royal Seal and coins and the denial of the privilege of signing title deeds are extremely difficult to explain, especially in the given scenario of hype and hallow surrounding the female predominance of the House.

Conclusion

Obviously, the peculiar tradition of inheritance prevailed in the family always treated their women exceptionally well in contrast to the norms existed in other *swaroopam* polities of the region where women were never treated eligible to be considered for the highest *sthanam*. As such, *Arakkal* family offers a brighter picture of matrilineal women in sharp contrast to what is to be expected from the backdrop of the Kerala version of pre-modern Islam branded as obscurantist and being bashed consistently for its mannish proportions. Thus, the presence of female monarchs in this Muslim Royal House is definitely appreciable while analyzing from a gender perspective. Nevertheless, attributing standards of gender equality in their power relations seems unwarranted and unworkable. As has been exposed by the dispute elaborated above, the female monarchs of the house had never been treated absolutely on par with their male counterparts. The predominance ascribed to women of the family seems more ritualistic or ceremonial rather than exerting full and independent control over statecraft. Placing men and women in equal footing, though at least in theory, may presumably be the result of an expediency emanated out of the existing nature of maritime profession of these merchant monarchs that compelled their abstaining from home for longer intervals. The absence of male members for longer intervals may naturally have forced the elder member of the female strata to take charge of familial responsibilities and this recoument may have been well institutionalized in course of time. To explicate this general postulation, it is necessary to have a broader understanding of the evolution, working and uniqueness of the matrilineal norms of inheritance prevalent among the Mappilas of North Malabar since the socio-political predominance of *Arakkal swaroopam* owes mostly to their reputation of being the head of Muslim congregation in the region.

Notes

1. All the primary sources consulted for preparing this article such as proceedings, orders and correspondence of the colonial government are ac-

cessed from the bundle of archival documents titled *Arakkal Papers Vol.I*, preserved in Regional Archives, Kozhikode.

2. Persian term meaning ‘authority. Here, it refers to the highest monarchical position.
3. Matrilineal system of inheritance.
4. Madras Government Proceedings No. 382 dated 23rd September 1862, *Arakkal Papers Vol.I*, Regional Archives, Kozhikode.
5. See *the Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri: Being the Third Part of the Travels of M. de Thevenot into the Levant and the Third Part of a Voyage Round the World by Dr. John Francis Gemelli Careri*, compiled, edited and published in 1949 by National Archives of India, New Delhi.
6. Memorandum dated 16th December 1862 submitted by Ali Raja as seen quoted in the Madras Government (Political Department) Proceedings No.30 dated 28th January 1863. *Arakkal Papers Vol.I*

References

- Arunima, G. 1995. “Matriliney and its Discontents”. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 22 (2/3), pp.157-67.
- Ashraf, K.K. 1998. *Reform and Revival among the Muslims of Kerala: A study of Muslim aikiyasangam*. Unpublished M,Phil thesis. New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- Avari, Burjor. 2013. *Islamic Civilization in South Asia- A History of Muslim Power and Presence in the Indian Subcontinent*. New York: Routledge.
- Bachofen, J.J. 1992. *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Barbosa, Duarte. 1921. *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*. (Tr. and edited by Henry E.J Stanley Dames). London.
- Bouchon, Genevieve. 1988. *Regent of the Sea*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Buchanan, Francis. 1807. *A Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Section III, Vol. II. London: English East India Company.
- Dube, Leela. 1969. *Matriliney and Islam: Religion and Society in the Laccadives*. Delhi: National Publishing House.
- Engels, Frederic. 2010. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. (First Published in German, 1884). New York: Penguin.
- Kottakkunnummal, Manaf. 2014. *Indigenous Customs and Colonial Law: Contestations in Religion, Gender, and Family among Matrilineal Mappila Muslims in Colonial Malabar, Kerala, c. 1910-1928*. New Delhi: Sage Open, January-March.
- Kurup, KKN.1975. *Ali Rajas of Cannanore*. Thiruvananthapuram: College

Book House.

- Mailaparambil, Binu John. 2011. *Lords of the Sea: The Ali Rajas of Cannanore and the Political Economy of Malabar (1663-1723)*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing.
- Makhdam, Zainuddin S. 2006. *Tuhfathul Mujahideen –A Historical Epic of the Sixteenth Century*. (Translated and annotated by S. Muhammad Husayn Nainar). Kozhikode: Other Books. (written originally in Arabic in 1583).
- McLennan, J.Ferguson. 1970. *Primitive Marriage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, Ronald E. 1976. *Mappila Muslims of Kerala, A study in Islamic Trends*. Madras: Orient Longman.
- Varma, K.T. Ravi. 2004. *Marumakkathayam: Gothra Marumakkathayavum Vadakkan Sampradhayanghalum*. (Mal). Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Language Institute.