

THE KEYS OF MALABAR

13 sheets

13 OCT 1930

BY

CHURIA VASUDEVAN

983

TELLICHERRY

1930

Y73C&D.2123

N30

74353

B. S. Selyanarajun

\*\*\*\*\*

செப்பனிருவதற்காக எடுத்துக்  
கொள்ளப்பட்ட

புத்தகம் மாதம்

வருடம் 1988

செப்பனிட்டு முடித்த

புத்தகம் மாதம்

வருடம் 1988

ஆராய்ச்சி உதவியாளர்  
கையொப்பம்

1988

\*\*\*\*\*

THE KEYIS OF MALABAR

BY

CHURIA VASUDEVAN

Associate

of the

Royal Institute of Public Health, London.

HEALTH INSPECTOR (RETIRED)

of the Madras Public Health Department.

Director, The Victoria Memorial Library, and

Secretary, Peoples' and Rate-Payers' Association.

TELLICHERRY.



PRINTED AT THE VIDYA VILASAM PRESS,

TELLICHERRY.

1930.

Y73 (QV).2123/  
N30

74 353

DEDICATED

---

To the Keyis among whom I have many  
friends.

CHURIA VASUDEVAN.

2

13 OCT 1930

FOREWORD.

---

In the spring of 1916, a book in Malayalam of over 70 pages, "The History of the Keyis of Malabar" from the pen of Mr. A. P. Ummerkutty, a son of the wellknown Makki Keyi, the then 'Karnavan' (head) of the Keloth branch of the 'Chovvakkaran tarwad,' (family) was published at Tellicherry. Being employed outside Malabar from that time for over ten years, I had not heard of or seen the book. Recently my friend the author, was good enough to favour me with a copy. Its perusal greatly interested me. I thought the English reading public would be glad to know something of the Keyis. I doubted if a translation would appeal to their fancy. I therefore tried to condense it to the limits of a magazine article. But as I found the fascination of the subject would be lost thereby, I decided on issuing it with the Author's permission in the form it now appears, a small pamphlet.

In its compilation, I have had to differ in a few instances from the conclusions arrived at by the author from his premises and to deduce my own inferences therefrom, to gather some additional

information from my Keyi friends and others and from a few publications not needing acknowledgment, to intersperse it with my quota of personal knowledge of their habits and customs and with some of my *obiter dicta*. The parallel attempted between the English and the Keyis, whatever it may be worth, is my own.

This is my first debut into the realms of authorship, late in the evening of my life. I do not lay claim to any originality and not having had the advantage of university education for wielding a facile pen, to any literary merit either, in the production of this pamphlet. But if it would tend to the rousing up of some interest in the ancestry of the Keyis and in the antiquity of some of the buildings erected by them in Tellicherry which are still in existence in good state of preservation in spite of their years as venerable landmarks of a remote past, I shall not have attempted it in vain.

Tellicherry,

Septer. 1930.

CHURIA VASUDEVAN.

## THE KEYIS OF MALABAR.

---

It has been believed by many, that Keyi was a hereditary title conferred upon a class of Moplas in North Malabar in times of yore, by a native Raja for some conspicuous service rendered. But it is not so. The term originally was 'Kakka' which in Gujaratti meant merely 'Karanavan', a nomenclature applied to any elderly person among both the Hindus and the Muhammadans. It has now come to be a respectable way of addressing any person of the latter faith, just in the same way as the word 'Mr.' is now prefixed to English and Indian names in common parlance. The word 'Keyi' a later introduction, said to be of Persian origin and meant "owner", was used in Bombay by the crew and other servants to designate the owner of a vessel. Kunhi Pakki Kakka who had succeeded to the headship of an affluent family of Moplas in M. E. 985 (A. D. 1809) had owned several crafts plying between Malabar and Bombay. He was addressed by this honourific title by his servants. Thenceforward, he, the 4th lineal descendant of the family became known as Kunhi Pakki Keyi instead of 'Kakka' and was the first to be known

as such in Tellicherry as well. All his descendants are now known with this appellation in public and Government records—a term to which an importance of nobility has become attached owing to the great wealth of the family. Although any Mopla may tack it on to his name, no one has attempted to do it in Government records, even though the sons of Keyis are called by this title by courtesy by the ordinary man.

The Keyis may well be termed the aristocracy among the Moplas of North Malabar, next only in importance to the Sultan Ali Raja of Arakkal near Cannanore. But compared to them in point of wealth, the Sultan and the other Hindu Rajas are nowhere. According to well authenticated accounts, their origin has been traced back to the 17th century about A. D. 1680, when the founder of the family Aluppy Kakka by name, lived as a petty trader in pepper, copra etc., at Chovva, a small inland hamlet in Chirakkal Taluq about 3 miles to the South-East of Cannanore. He gradually flourished in his business and when he found that merchants from Tellicherry who bought his wares, were shipping them to foreign countries and making large profits, he decided to migrate to that place with his sister and her two boys who then formed his family group. This is why every member of the Keyi family reverentially adopts



'Chovvakkaran' (resident of Chovva) as the chief of his surnames.

Tellicherry was then under the suzerainty of the Dutch, with the Raja of Kottayam who owned extensive properties there, as their vassal. Aluppi Kakka got leased a strip of land from the Raja near the foreshore and put up a small yard for drying copra and a thatched shed for storing it. He prospered steadily in business and finding the accommodation insufficient, built a large warehouse nearby, both to live in and to store his wares. This godown was popularly known as 'Kakka's Pandikasala' and exists to this day under the old name near the present pier, a little to the North of the offices of the Scindia Steam Navigation Company. Later, finding it irksome for his womenfolk to live in a warehouse, he bought some land about a mile to the North and built a large house, the biggest then in Tellicherry and shifted to it. He named it 'Orkateri'. It is noteworthy that in a long line of Keyis from that time (1680) to this, the only two members who ever cared to aspire for university honours or Government service, Mr. C. O. Aluppy Keyi, B. A., B. L., the District Munsif of Badagara and his uncle and father-in-law the late C. O. Mammad Keyi a Deputy Inspector of Mopla Schools in Malabar, both belonged to this earliest house.

At this time one of the most powerful amongst the Tellicherry Moplas was the 'Vaniambalath family.' They were jealous of the prosperity of the foreigner Aluppy Kakka and troubled him in various ways. But like an astute diplomat, he tried to conciliate them by asking for a lady of that house in marriage. Not only was this refused, they even prevented him from going for worship in a mosque in their possession and also interdicted the Kaathi (priest) from doing service for him. Kakka thereupon built a fine mosque with copper-plate roofing and gold domes near his warehouse and arranged a separate Kaathi for his family and since then the Keyis have their own priest. He named it 'Thazhayil Mosque' and is still in existence in good condition, to the East of the present offices of the English and Scotch Co., though nearly two and a half centuries old. In retaliation for the matrimonial insult he recorded in his well kept diary, that no member of his family should ever have marital relationship with the 'Vaniambalath House.' All except one branch honoured and still honours this injunction. The exact date of Aluppy Kakka's death is not known. But he lies buried in his own mosque.

His nephew Moossa Kakka had been started in business by his uncle. But it did not prosper in spite of several small crafts he had built for his

trade. About this time, Tippu invaded Malabar and began his forcible conversions. In spite of his being a co-religionist of this Potentate, it was Moossa Kakka who conveyed numerous refugees to Travancore in his 'Pattamans or small crafts.' This act later on stood him in good stead. For, when Tippu left and the country was found uncongenial for trade, Kakka went over to Travancore. The Maharajah received him with all kindness and rendered every facility for trade. He thus amassed immense wealth and became possessed of extensive landed properties in that State. It appears, the place he lived in at Aleppy—a seaport in Travancore—is still called 'Moossa Kakka Valap' (compound) and the canal he dug for his timber trade is called 'Moossa Kakka Kayal' (canal). He soon left that State and settled down in Telli-cherry. It was then that he built on the site of his uncle's thatched shed and drying yard, a large warehouse on the model of Bombay warehouses with glass windows. This exists to this day to the South of the offices of Aspinwall & Co., and is still known as 'Kannadi Pandikasala' (glass warehouse) its old name.

Tellicherry was then in the possession of the English and as Moossa Kakka had rendered assistance to them in various ways, he became their

firm friend. With their help he traded extensively with London, Paris, Amsterdam, and other foreign countries, established agencies in Bombay, Madras, Pudukkotta etc., built boats, pattamars and sailing vessels at Cochin and became a contractor to the East India Company for supplying rice and other provisions to the officers and the military. It appears that at one time owing to military exigencies, as the Company had not cash in hand to pay him, they executed a bond for 20 lakhs of Sicea Rupees. In regard to this the story is, that when Tippu and English were engaged in battle, and the latter fell short of ball ammunition, Kakka gave them 20 lakhs of Sicea coin which is rounded in shape for their use and that it was in repayment of this amount that the bond was executed. This is evidently a pure canard in keeping with the times and the men of the times. It shows perhaps, if anything, the cordial relationship existing between the Company and Moossa Kakka.

When Moossa Kakka was carrying on trade at Bombay, he one day sent his 'Kariyastan' (agent) for something to the famous Bombay market, famous even at that early time about the end of the 18th century for its magnificence, where the latter seeing a good fish his master had special predilection for, decided to purchase it. But there was keen competition, the bid went higher and higher,

7

till at last it was knocked down to the 'Kariyastari' for Rs. 900. When Moossa Kakka was informed of it, he paid the amount without demur. It is of course difficult to give credence to the whole of this story which perhaps was intended merely to show that Kakka did not care to mince matters where prestige was concerned. Whatever it was, in the alleged price paid for the fish there was without doubt a great deal of exaggeration, nay, it must certainly have been a fabulous one. There would however seem to be some substratum of truth in the incident, as it subsequently turned out, that it indirectly laid the foundation for their vast properties in Bombay. For when the Government at a later period began to auction large acres of 'darkhast' (quit rent) land there, it is said only a few persons came forward to bid against Moossa Kakka, the man, so the story went, who had paid an enormous price for just a fish.

Like his uncle, Moossa Kakka was also intensely religious and decided to build a mosque. The place selected was the sugar plantation of the early Dutch which had passed into the hands of the English. The Company offered it free to their contractor, but as the latter had religious scruples to build a mosque on a free-gift land, a nominal price was accepted by the Company. The beautiful edifice built there, the 'Odathil Mosque' named so

472 (27). 2123 74353

after the plantation land on which it stood, is the famous juma mosque of the Moplas. It occupies over two acres of land in the heart of the town, has copper-plate roofing and six gold domes. This is one of the sights of Tellicherry. A special feature with it is, that in its grave-yard only the Keyis and their wives and children are buried, although any Mopla may offer prayers in the mosque.

Moossa Kakka however did not live to see the gold domes fixed upon his mosque. This was only done over half a century later about 1861 by Kunhammed Keyi a renowned successor of his. The ceremony was performed with great eclat and at considerable cost. At the function the invited upperten were treated to tea and sweets on a lavish scale. But to supply sweet drinks to the very large concourse of his co-religionists assembled, he hit upon the novel idea of putting in bags and bags of sugar in the two mosque wells and requesting them to help themselves with the sweetened water. Whether this strange method of mass entertainment was by them taken seriously or as a joke I am unable to vouch for. Suffice it to say that the people freely enjoyed the drink. In the present age of education, enlightenment and advanced views on hygiene and sanitation, it would certainly have been taken as a gross insult, the function boycotted

and Municipal Law put in motion against the host. But in those olden times it was not even resented was evidenced from the fact that six years later some time in 1867, a similar practice characterised the opening ceremony of a public well sunk by the author's father the late Churia Raman then a Tahsildar at Calicut and gifted to the Municipality. At that function also bags and bags of sugar were emptied into the well to afford sweet drinks to the large multitude of people gathered there. This well situated in the heart of the town at 'Chandanavandithavalam or Jutka stand' and which still exists with a tablet on its parapet announcing the donor's name, was for a long time known as 'Panjara-kinar' or sugared well. This was the first and earliest beneficence to the newly constituted (in 1856) Tellicherry Municipality. It was intended as his contribution, however small, in improving the amenities of life in the new Municipality where his brother the late Churia Kanaran a retired Deputy Collector of eminence who got his full pay as his pension, was planning and carrying out various schemes for the benefit of the people in his capacity as its first Vice-President as the post was then termed. There are a few men still living who can bear testimony to all the above facts and I also remember some of them as told me by the older members of my family. I trust this digression would be kindly excused.

About this time the English decided to subdue the Sultan Ali Raja of Arakkal and in order to avoid a war, deputed Moossa Kakka as their plenipotentiary. He found the Sultan obdurate and carried back the message that the latter was prepared for war. In a few months two English vessels appeared off the coast of Cannanore and an ultimatum demanding submission within 24 hours was sent to the Sultan. But he still refused and began hostilities by firing on the English vessels from the fort, which however fell short into the sea. The English guns then demolished a part of the fort and as the Sultan's forces fled, they landed and occupied it. The Sultan grew alarmed and entreated Moossa Kakka to intercede as his envoy and bring about peace. The result was, the Sultan accepted the supremacy of the English who demanded a payment of 10 lakhs of rupees, also as war expenses and as they refused instalment payments and the Sultan had not sufficient funds, Kakka advanced the whole amount as a loan. This was recovered by him from the Sultan's revenues which had been hypothecated to him. In appreciation of this help, the Sultan decided to allow marital relationship between the two houses. But there were certain difficulties. Among the Moplas, the practice is for the husband to take his residence permanently in the wife's house, his and wife's expenses being



met by him. He would pay only rare visits to his ancestral abode. In the palace, the custom is for a Beebe's (as the princess is called) consort to be maintained by the royal household. If a prince married outside royalty, the wife had to live in the palace, it being considered *infra dig* for a prince to live in the wife's house. Kakka insisted on the ordinary practice of Moplas being followed, but the Sultan would not countenance it. In the end, the latter gave way so far as to accept payment for meeting the consort's expenses and a marriage took place between Ussankutty, a nephew of Kakka and a Beebe of the palace. A connection thus begun still continues. The marriage of a prince with a lady of Kakka's family did not take place, as both would not yield their respective positions in this respect. It may here be mentioned that the consort of a Beebe gets enobled with the recognised title of 'Elaya', just in the same way as the consort of a princess of Travancore State bears the title of 'Koil Thampuran'. This renowned man died in M. E. 882, (A. D. 1806) and lies buried in his own Odathil Mosque in a beautiful mausoleum erected over his grave.

"Wealth joins wealth" is an old saw in Malayalam. And in conformity with this, it so happened that one of the sailing vessels named 'Mugalar' built by Moossa Kakka, was sent by his nephew

Valia Makki Kakka who had succeeded his uncle, to foreign countries with valuable merchandise. As it did not return for a considerable time, it was given up for lost. But one day as fortune would have it, it was found drifting rudderless, mastless and crewless towards the reefs in the sea near what is known as 'Eenthumgad' hillock to the South of the present European Club. On examining, it was found full of treasure. Apparently it had been captured by pirates who were then infesting all seas. They had probably used it for storing their booty, but unluckily for them it had been caught in a storm and the pirates had either escaped as best they could or died in the sea. This was any way a windfall to the Kakka and to commemorate the event he built a mosque on the land near the Club, near where the vessel had drifted. For this much of the materials of the vessel were used and he named it 'Mugalar'. This was some time in M. E. 984 (A. D. 1808) and still exists.

There is very little of special interest to record in the lives of the later Keyis except the fact that one of them had been on a pilgrimage to Mecca in M. E. 1062 (A. D. 1876) and had there constructed at great cost a large rest-house still in existence for the convenience of Mopla pilgrims and that two of them had married Arab women resident in Bombay. A marital connection thus begun however stopped

with them. Perhaps it was all for the good of North Malabar, if we give credance to the belief held in some quarters that long years of such relationship with the Arab merchants who had traded with South Malabar from as early as the 9th century and whose religious fervour is well-known, is in a small way responsible for the fanaticism of the South Malabar Moplas.

I think the Keyis of Malabar may well be compared with the English in India. For, while the latter from a foothold granted to them in Madrasapatam (Madras) by the Nawab of the Carnatic early in the 17th century (A. D. 1639) extended their sway over the whole of India by conquest by the sword, the former from a strip of land for a shed and a drying yard at the sea-front at Telli-cherry, granted by the Rajah of Kottayam also in the 17th century (A. D. 1680) acquired immense landed properties in Malabar, South Canara, Cochin, Travancore, Tinnevelly, Coorg and Bombay by conquest by trade. Again, like the followers of the early English Settlers who about the middle of the 18th century exchanged the sword for the pen, even so the descendants of the early Keyis about the same period gave up trade for administering their vast estates which on a modest estimate is now valued at some crores of rupees. It appears that quite recently the head of the Keloth branch

of the family obtained a few lakhs of rupees for some of their lands and buildings acquired by the Bombay Improvement Trust.

Now as years rolled on and the members of the family increased, they were obliged to divide and subdivide with the result that there are now about 10 branches. The noteworthy fact with regard to this is, that the divisions all took place on oral 'karar' (agreement).

In point of inheritance the Keyis follow the Marumakkathayam law like the Hindus of North Malabar, and as they are all the descendants of one parent stock they cannot and do not intermarry. This fact and their dowry system are of great advantage to the non-Keyi Moplas whose men are in demand with gifts of substantial dowries, as husbands to the ladies of the Keyi family and whose ladies are taken in wedlock by the Keyi men whose wealth go to enrich the children born of such union. So much so, that about 80 per cent of the lands and almost all the big houses, ware-houses etc., in the Municipality of Tellicherry, belong to the Keyis and their children by inheritance or as dowry. But none however of the buildings, with the exception perhaps of that imposing structure, the 'Mahal' built by the late Makki Keyi—one of the grandest of later Keyis at a cost of about a lakh of rupees, can lay claim to any architectural magnificence. They

may however be of some archeological interest from their antiquity, if some one in the family would have the imagination to put up tablets, on the numerous mosques and other edifices built by them in all places where they own properties, to commemorate the name and fame of the builders and the date of construction.

I think the public in general and the Keyis in particular owe a great deal to Mr. Ummerkutty for unearthing much interesting information about the latter, long lost in oblivion. Being a Keyi's son he had special facilities and he had well used his talents and his patience for rummaging old family records which are a sealed book to the outsider. The historical inexactitude in it, if any, is excusable for the fact that the times dealt with were unsettled ones of the remote past and the men who played their part were of so meagre an education, that one is inclined to give them credit for what they recorded.

Perhaps a narrative of the Keyis would not be deemed complete without some reference to the Keyis of the day. Apparently that was why Mr. Ummer Kutty had drawn up an elaborate genealogy of the Keyis and brought it up to the personages existing in 1916, the year of publication of his book. I have however with a similar object in

view and for the sake of brevity struck out a different line. But unlike Mr. Ummer Kutty I have skipped over a long series of years and a long line of Keyis and have contented myself with merely jotting down the names of those who now preside or (deo volente) may preside some day over the destinies of the several branches of the illustrious Chovvakkaran Tarwad of the Keyis of Malabar.

It is worthy of note that for the first time since the Tellicherry Municipality was constituted 64 years ago, a Mopla, Chovvakkaran Powkath Mammu Keyi a direct nephew and son-in-law of the Keyi shown 9th in the list below, has the honour of occupying the civic chair as Chairman elected by the Councillors. It augurs well for the Municipality and the Mopla community, that the first Mopla Chairman is of the distinguished Chovvakkaran House whose variegated achievements in different fields of activities particularly trade the cornerstone of prosperity of communities as of nations, and whose concern for the welfare of Tellicherry owing to their large vested interests therein dating back from as early as the 17th century, I have attempted to describe as vividly as I could in the foregoing pages.

✓ NAMES OF KEYS:

---

1. Chovvakkaran Keloth Puthiamaliammel  
Kunhammed Keyi,
2. Chovvakkaran Keloth Puthiamaliammel  
Khan Sahib Mammad Keyi,
3. Chovvakkaran Valiapurayil Mayankutty  
Keyi,
4. Ditto Ditto Moidu Keyi,
5. Chovvakkaran Puthiapurayil Mammu Keyi,
6. Ditto Ditto Mammali Keyi
7. Chovvakkaran Orkkatteri Pokker Keyi,
8. Ditto Ditto Savankutty Koyi,
9. Chovvakkaran Fowkath Alippi Keyi,
10. Ditto Ditto Mammali Keyi.

## APPENDIX.

Reprint of an article by the Author in  
the West Coast Spectator of 20th July 1930.

## THE KEYIS UNDER SEARCHLIGHT.

:o:

## A CHARACTER SKETCH.

Mr. C. Vasudevan writes from Tellicherry.

In the hope that the indulgence due to a story-teller would be extended to me and from whatever standpoint I view the living Keyis I may be landed on debatable ground and would be excused, I shall attempt to give my impressions of some of the outstanding personalities among them.

— C. K. P. Kunhamad Keyi is the head of the Keloth branch, a sexagenarian on whom age sits lightly, who leads a simple life, simple in dress, simple in habits, a strict follower of the 'Marumakkathayam' system of inheritance who distributes maintenance to the members of the family as regularly as on a pay-day in a Government office, and enriches the tarwad with the large annual surpluses as few of his predecessors have done, the Croeses of Tellicherry who moves about unnoticed, walking, or driving in his four-wheeler (he has not yet believed in the fashionable mode of locomotion.



of the present day, the motor car) with hardly anything noticeable to rivet public attention on him, a friend and helper of his tenants.

C. K. P. Mammad Keyi is the heir-apparent to the headship of the same branch, a tall commanding figure of slender build who leads the fashion among the Keyis, a politician of parts and of no mean order, a 'persona grata' with the official hemisphere, keeps an open house, has a predilection for gathering knowledge from all and sundry, is a bureau of information on many men and on many matters, an agreeable conversationalist, had the honour of being conferred the title of 'Khan Sahib' the first among the Keyis to get it, at the last King's Birthday.

C. P. Alippi Keyi is the head of the Poukkath branch, a venerable old gentleman, the Pepper Prince of Tellicherry who considers it his duty to carry on the traditional trade in that commodity, perhaps in memory of the founder of the family who first traded in it and amassed wealth by it.

C. V. Mayankutty Keyi is the head of the Valiyapurayil branch, a stalwart figure, a follower of Sandow, whose hobby is wrestling

C. O. Pokker Keyi is the head of the Orkatteri branch, a high robust person, clad always in the white long robe called 'Isthash' in Arabic, the characteristic dress of the Keyis of old and of the

Thangals and Moolvees (priests), he disdains the fashions of the day, holds his head high as the lineal descendant, and the proud occupant of the first house (Orkatteri built by the first Keyi in the 18th century), is the owner of the 'Rabbit Island' in the sea, a charming clustre of cocconut trees, curiously with a fresh-water well amidst, a fine rendezvous for a picnic party, accessible on foot through shallow water at low tide, off the coast of Dharmadam, a couple of miles to the North of Tellicherry.

Of the junior Keyis the most prominent are, C. P. Cheriya Alippi a democrat of democrats who does not care to lay much store over the honourofic title of 'Keyi', an ardent Congressman of the old non-co-operation days who whether he now believes or not in the possibilities of a revival of that latent or defunct organisation has held his hand without even dabbling in it, a man of precision and of sturdy independence, the President of the Peoples' and Rate-Payers' Association, he maintains a piece-goods shop just to keep himself engaged, for,

SATAN FINDS SOME MISCHIEF STILL

FOR IDLE HANDS TO DO.

C. P. Mammoo Keyi of fair complexion, a good friend, a genial host with pleasantness always beaming in the face, with a kindness of heart sometimes compelling vacillation in action, is the

Cash-keeper at Messrs. Peirce Leslie & Co., where he is in his native element of handling money. (A Municipal Councillor since 1925, elected as Chairman in August 1930, on leave from his post in the Company to devote his full time to Municipal Affairs).

C. K. Kunhi Pakki Keyi, a grand-son of that great man Makki Keyi who had an individuality all his own and who built the 'Mahala Mansion' the boast of Tellicherry, a handsome young man, an attractive personality, dressed ever in fashion, a big figure, big beyond his years, the owner of the Sada Cinema edifice, the first and finest pleasure house in Tellicherry, he keeps his home in a comingling of oriental splendour and occidental nicety.

Last but not least is C. K. P. Kunhi Pakki Keyi, a gentle mannered person, neat and stylish, without ostentation of birth, ever willing to mingle with the plebian, the donor, one among a few, of a clock to the Victoria Memorial Library, and withal charitably disposed.

It is a pity that almost all the young Keyis have stopped short of their education with the High-School standard. Born with silver spoons in their mouths, they might easily have aspired higher into the University education and the public service, like the scions of the Hindu Aristocracy of South Malabar. It is a thousand pities they didn't and the younger generation don't.