Research Article

Arabi-Malayalam Disaster Ballads: Performative Poetry and Community Resilience

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This paper presents three disaster narratives in Arabi-Malayalam *Typhoon Ballad* (*toofaan maala*) by Kattilveettil Ahmed Koya (1909), *Flood* (*vellappokkam*) by Mundambara Unnimammad (1924), and *Flood Ballad* (*vellappokka maala*) by Pulikkottil Haidar (1961). We explore the aestheticized expressions of flood disasters, their impact on landscape and people, and the role of cultural and artistic productions in enhancing community resilience and risk perception. We approach these Arabi-Malayalam disaster ballads as deliberate engagement with the mechanisms of the disaster cycle of preparedness, response, and recovery. Arguing that these compositions constitute vital strategies in cultivating effective response to disasters, we relate them to official and historical records as well as an ethnographic account following the 2018 Kerala floods. We conclude that the tradition of Arabi-Malayalam disaster ballads constitutes an attempt to standardise and aestheticize spontaneous post-disaster narratives that survivors and rescuers tell and retell for sharing their experiences. Our analysis builds on the concept of local and indigenous knowledge systems (LINKS) to argue that such compositions are crucial for producing knowledge on participatory and organised decision-making processes, desirable leadership skills, and collaborative action aimed at survival, relief, and rescue.

Disasters, Resilience, Arabi-Malayalam, LINKS, Environment

Introduction[1]

The flood disasters that hit Kerala in 2018 disrupted the lives and livelihoods of millions in the densely populated state, sandwiched between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats and interlaced by over forty rivers (PDNA 2018, CWC 2018, Joseph *et al.* 2020: 1–2, Raman 2020: 323–25). Kerala's government, local self-governance bodies (*panchayat*s), and non-partisan and community organisations coordinated swift and efficient disaster response, with fisherfolk trade unions at the forefront (PDNA 2018: 13–14, 305; Kuttappan 2019, Eswaran and Devika n.d.). The consecutive flood and landslide disasters of 2019 alerted experts, policy makers and communities to the growing need for better preparedness in the future. Deliberate preparation for disasters is known as disaster risk reduction (DRR), which is closely related to disaster management policies relying on technological and technocratic strategies such as forecasting systems and disaster management agencies. Such mechanisms and organisations are embedded in technoscientific frameworks informing top-down responses to climate change (cf. Nightingale *et al.* 2020: 348). While exposing relatively poor technoscientific DRR

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[1] This article is based on a jointly written paper presented by Kalluvalappil in the *International Convention for Asian Studies'* ICAS-12 Forum: *Climate Change in Coastal Cities*, in August 2021.

infrastructure in Kerala, the 2018 and 2019 floods also demonstrated the significance of effective societal organisation (Eswaran and Devika n.d., Joseph *et al*. 2020, Raman 2020, Martin *et al.* n.d.). The devastating floods also reminded Keralites of the mega-floods of 1924, and of the flood literature that emerged soon after in Malayalam novels and short stories. The tradition of the Arabi-Malayalam flood ballads too caught the attention of scholars, noting their importance for "understanding of and expectations for future disasters" (Ul-Ihthisam and Menon 2022: 1038, 1040–42); this can be paraphrased in terms of DRR as risk perception and preparedness for disasters. These aspects of DRR primarily rely on cultural and societal attitudes, beyond the reach of technoscientific fixes (Nightingale *et al.* 2020: 345).

DRR and LINKS

Organically developed mechanisms of preparedness for and response to disasters are conceptualized as *local and indigenous knowledge systems* (LINKS) by the United Nations' (UN) policy guidance *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction* 2015–2030 (SFDRR). It prescribes LINKS as "traditional, indigenous and local knowledge and practices" to complement and inform "scientific knowledge in disaster risk assessment and the development and implementation of policies, strategies, plans and programmes of specific sectors, with a cross-sectoral approach, which should be tailored to localities and to the context" (UNDRR 2015: 14, see also Rahman *et al*. 2017, McWilliam *et al*. 2020: 7–8). Studies on forecasting, management, and mitigation of floods were developed over centuries of collective experience, demonstrating how "indigenous knowledge is a precious national resource that can facilitate the process of disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness and response in cost-effective, participatory and sustainable ways" (Dube and Munsaka 2018: 6). It is, however, difficult to pinpoint what precisely constitutes indigenous knowledge systems in relation to disaster risk reduction beyond practical knowledge such as building traditions (Ortega *et al*. 2017) or strategies that enhance resilience to environmental risks and hazards (Ford *et al*. 2020).

Arguably, traditional knowledge developed in response to recurring disasters produced varied cultural forms from literature to rituals that may be less obviously related to DRR mechanism. In his analysis of traditional knowledge production, Rajan Gurukkal (2019: 23–24) states that:

> [k]nowledge is not always rational, although it pertains to the material processes of subsistence and survival. Bizarre beliefs and practices often go mixed up with the use of technology and the communities seldom make any separation between the material tools and magical rituals. In pre-capitalist social formations, rational knowledge and irrational practices were inextricably commingled. Time and again, the rational knowledge owed its origins to irrational beliefs. The rise of ancient Indian astronomy with advanced mathematical tools is a good example for this.

Ostensibly, the same can be said about the production of traditional knowledge on disaster management. Take for example a story transmitted orally over the generations, branching into different tellings. We would not expect such an inaccurate means of transmission to invoke a quick, efficient response to disaster. Yet, one such story-telling tradition is widely discussed in relation to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, namely the tsunami story (*cerita smong*) of Simeulue Island in Indonesia (Yogaswara and Yulianto 2005, 2008, Rahman *et al*. 2017, 2018: 16–17). While limited in scope (Lauer 2012), their contribution to community resilience and organisation is remarkable. In this respect, the Malayalam flood literature emerging after the 1924 floods is significant (Arafath 2018: 42–43, cf. Sankar 2018: 385–86).

How does literature composed in response to disasters contribute to the management of 'riskscapes', to use Ravi Raman's (2020) terminology? Such culture-centred responses to disasters operate at the grassroots levels of society, in contrast to elite cultural forms that tend to gloss over unpredictable disruption to human-centred modernity predicated above and against nature and its uncertainties lurking in the unknown. Amitav Ghosh (2016: 3–84) notes this reluctance to meaningfully reflect on environmental disasters in relation to the plots of modern novels, naming it as the "great derangement", a symptom of modern society failing to address the disastrous implications of anthropogenic climate change.[2] To paraphrase Ghosh, the hegemonic literary imagination is limiting in its portrayal of reality as the backstage for the human, individual subject, undisrupted by non-human, disastrous infiltrations into the mundane, self-centred human experience. The modern novel, argues Ghosh, falls short of addressing natural disasters, leaving it instead to religious traditions or, alternatively, to sci-fi literature replete with 'unrealistic' doomsday scenarios (cf. Määttä 2015: 426–29). In this sense, Arabi-Malayalam flood ballads constitute a counter-hegemonic literary formation. How to construe their contribution to community resilience at the face of the Anthropocene's great derangement, is the main question addressed in this study.

The Flood Ballads: Language, Literature, Performance

Arabi-Malayalam flood ballads depict disasters as perceived and managed by affected communities in the Malabar district, previously administered within the Madras Presidency during British colonial rule (1800–1947). The name Malabar, however, was coined by Arabic speakers, who gradually settled in the region since the 10th or 11th centuries, forming coastal communities of Muslim traders and seafarers (Kooria and Pearson 2018, cf. Wink 1990–2003). Centuries of cross-cultural exchange and language contacts between Arabic and Malayalam speakers engendered Arabi-Malayalam literature sometime around the early 17th century (Ilias and Hussain 2017: 9–47). The corpus of Arabi-Malayalam literature is an amalgamation of oral and written transmission with the Arabic script slightly revised to represent Malayalam phonemes (Shamsuddin 1978).[3]

Arabi-Malayalam literature features both performative and written stylistic conventions. Its most notable feature is the *ishal*, 'tune', or 'musical chapter', signifying strophes with differentiated rhythmic and melodic styles. Each *ishal* is indicated by the first word or two of the model *ishal* to signal which rhythm and tune the performers should follow. The contents of Arabi-Malayalam literature vary from devotional poetry to historical songs narrating foundational events in Islamic history such as the battle of Badr (624 CE). The flood ballads in this tradition can be seen as a conscious attempt to aestheticize disaster narratives in a process of advancing disaster risk perception from experiential to tacit knowledge. Arabi-Malayalam flood ballads thus offer a case study for analysing the intersection between LINKS and community resilience. We propose, however, going beyond typical disaster management concerns such as forecasting and evacuation routes, and rather address irrational aspects of effective response such as actions motivated by faith and religiosity.

In the following sections, we introduce selected verses of two flood ballads and a full translation of a third, the most recent and the shortest of the three, for investigating the intersections between literature, performance, religion, and community resilience at the face of disasters. We do so by converging DRR approaches, literary analysis, and ethnography in relation to four disaster events over a century-odd span. The earliest example for a flood ballad available to

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[2] See also Nightingale *et al*. (2020: 346) for a discussion on Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* and attitudes towards uncertainties and indigenous knowledge production.

[3] For more on Arabi-Malayalam literature and language, see Karassery 1995, Valikkunnu and Tharamel 2006, Kutti 2006.

us is the *Typhoon Ballad* (*toofaan maala*) on a cyclone that hit the port of Calicut in 1909.[4] The longest and most complex one in the corpus is *Flood* (*vellappokkam*), narrating the flood disaster of 1924 (Abdullah and Abinshah 2015).[5] The most recent and the shortest is the *Flood Ballad* (*vellappokka maala*) composed by Pulikottil Haidar on the 1961 floods (Karassery 2007 [1979]). The article concludes with an ethnographic account of the 2018 flood disaster for analysing the flood ballads as a cultural production in response to social-ecological systemic shocks and the contribution of such bottom-up cultural responses to community resilience.

The *Typhoon Ballad*

The full Arabi-Malayalam title is *Typhoon Ballad: A New Poem about a Broken Boat*.[6] The author is Kattilveettil Ahammad Koya, the grandson of the Qadi of Calicut Abu Bakr Kunji. The scribe is Marakkar Ibn Kammu writing in 1909/H 1327, July 19/Jumada al-Akhira 30, and the publisher is Cambakassery Parambil Valiya Todika Alikkutti. The typhoon hit the port of Calicut some nine weeks earlier, in May 7/ Rabi'a al-Akhir 16. In fifteen *ishal*s, the poet describes the damages caused by the cyclone—the destruction of boats, ships, and goods in the port— supplemented by short verses of *madh* (praise poetry) and two lines describing the prophet's marriage.

Besides being the earliest available Arabi-Malayalam disaster ballad, the *Typhoon Ballad* is also the only known historical record of the 1909 Cyclone, a frequent event in the Indian Ocean, even if less so in the Arabian Sea (Jalal Uddin *et al*. 2021: 2). The memory of devastation caused among fisher communities by a recent cyclone disaster, Ockhi (November 30, 2017), is still fresh, adding to the records of recurring experiences of storm surges in the region (Martin *et al*. 2018; Ul-Ihthisam and Menon 2022: 6–8). The first *ishal* introducing the disaster as the main actor in the plot is thus an important ethno-historical record:

In world-famous Kerala, the most precious town is Calicut.
In that port, to be more specific, in the 16th day of the Second Rabia month,
From a thick, dark blanket of heavy rain clouds,
There emerged a fierce storm hitting with thunders and rain,
The earth shook and the water of the ocean turned around in waves.[7]

The second *ishal* describes the impact on the port area and the people's response, framed in religious terms:

By God's command, the ocean turned ferocious.
Big waves rose and invaded the shore,
Roaring, swelling with water, mightily high.
At the time of that terrifying disaster,
There were rows of many boats in the water.
They were approaching loaded with goods.
The sailors were about to set sails, but

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[4] A lithograph manuscript of the *Toofaan Maala* is kept in the British Library and remains to be catalogued and digitized. A scanned copy was rendered available to us by the Mappila Heritage Library (MHLD: 1277) in Calicut (Kerala), with the first two pages in colour and the remaining folios scanned in black and white.
[5] We are indebted to T. B. Venugopala Panicker, K. M. Abdullah and M. U. Abinshah for their guidance during several joint online reading sessions in 2021.
[6] *toofaan maala enna kottika polinja puthiya paattu*; we use the term 'ballad' for rendering the Arabi-Malayalam term *maala*, which literally means 'garland'.
[7] All the translations are by the authors of the present paper, based on MHLD: 1277.

Fearing the mighty threatening wind,
They cried out loud and jumped off the boats.
Some of them were anchored there.
The fierce wind hit, they started sinking,
[and they cried out] Ayyo! And ran.
Turning upside down, they ran towards the shore,
Some were crying, [and others] recited prayers while trembling.

Such expressions of religiosity seem to be embedded, perhaps even inherent, in disaster response mechanisms. Religion-oriented response is highlighted further, for example in the third *ishal*:

The people praying were pained and drowsy; they fainted, they sobbed:
"Oh God! Deliver our bodies ashore with our life!"
"Roam with God, the guarding Judge,
Behave well!" They cried.
They were beating the back of their necks, their chests, faces, heads,
While praying in this manner.

In response to the cyclone, the distressed people grab whatever they can to rescue themselves and others as the vessels are tossed in the water:

Two people were approaching the shore,
Tied to a big, strong steering pole, they turned over.
"We are stuck!" The two kids were shouting.
All those on the ship were petrified.
They shouted the cry of Takbeera (allahu akbar)
Everyone was deeply distressed, praying to God for rescue.
Within half an hour that ship too was brutally shattered.
Quickly jumping off the shore,
Many people immediately reached out their hands
And pulled them ashore.
[....]
They got closer, reaching out to the shore, all the while,
Fiercely beaten by frontal waves,
As the steering rod cracked into two.
Instantly [...] a bigger boat was fast approaching,
It too was tragically destroyed.
Once more, suddenly, everyone was equally thrown back into the ferocious water.
"We'd better approach the shore in a row."
Coming one by one all at once
They started colliding against each other, undergoing terrible accidents.
[…] suddenly the boats got scattered into rows
Nearing the shore, as the waves hit and break them.
Those who were standing ashore, on the sand, were deeply distressed.[8]

We propose to read such accounts as disaster management advice, whereby religiosity activates survival and rescue response mechanisms. This proposition can be tested in another Arabi-Malayalam disaster narrative, Mundambara Unnimammad's *Flood*.

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[8] The bracketed dots denote obscure verbal or nominal formations that we left out of translation.

Flood

The mega-floods of 1924 are told in numerous stories and songs in Malayalam, among which the best known is *In the Flood* (*vellappokkattil*) by Takazhi Shivashankarapillai. The whole of Kerala was flooded due to extreme rainfall during July 1924 (Ramaswamy 1985: 4–12, CWC 2018: 1–2). So devastating was the impact of the overflowing rivers, that the railway to Munnar was completely destroyed never to be rebuilt again (Sivaraman 2018). The Arabi-Malayalam *Flood* composed by Mundambara Unnimammad narrates the events unfolding during the disaster in towns and villages along the Chaliyar River, starting from Nilambur, on the slopes of the Western Ghats, and progressing with each *ishal* westwards, towards the shore.[9]

Flood was transcribed into the Malayalam script and printed along with an explanation-cum-adaptation into Malayalam prose by K. M. Abdulla and M. U. Abinshah in 2015. Since the poet mentions buildings that were rebuilt after the disaster, it is plausible that *Flood* must have been composed sometime soon or during the post-disaster recovery stage. The detailed, high-resolution account of the impact of the flood on individuals, communities, specific buildings and agrarian plots of land indicates the freshness of an account that must have been compiled soon after the actual events.

Flood is exceptionally complex and long compared with other Arabi-Malayalam disaster narratives (T. K. Hamza 2015). Apart from Arabic loanwords typical of Arabi-Malayalam, it also uses loanwords from Hindi/Urdu (e.g., *jaroorinaal*, or 'out of necessity') and English (e.g., *fittaaye*, 'fit'). It freely moves between registers, incorporating also Sanskrit lexemes (e.g., *jhatutiyil*, 'suddenly').[10] The rhyming scheme is typical of Arabi-Malayalam, combining Dravidian-style first-phoneme rhymes (*mona* or *kambi*) with end-rhymes that are more typical of Arabic poetry.

In its detailed account of the impact of and response to the disaster, *Flood* is also unique in comparison to Malayalam literature responding to and narrating the mega-floods of 1924 (Abdullah and Abinshah 2015: 32–37). It is effectively an ethnography of flood experiences of affected people, rich and poor, vulnerable and marginalised or affluent and powerful. Performative features like the *ishal* musical chapters, alliterations, and rhymes, coupled with figurative speech endow it with an epic-bardic character. Remarkably, though, the title of the poem is but a single word, *Flood*, with no generic specification such as *maala* (ballad), *paattu* (song), or *kissa* (story), which is typical of Arabi-Malayalam song titles (Ilias and Hussain 2017: 109–159). *Flood* is thus an innovative composition of Arabi-Malayalam poetry, disaster narratives, and ethnography.

Take for example the second verse of the fifth *ishal*, focusing on the flooded Puthalam, a small place near Areekode, where the poet himself resided at the time. This verse gives details of damages, spontaneous relief operations, and the names of leaders effectively responding to the disaster impact.

The number of people was not reduced,
Thanks to God's grace.
As that place, Puthalam, *was filled with water all over,*
Many people had to quickly salvage all their belongings.
They haphazardly sheltered at the great house of the affluent Kunjoyan Kutti,
a man of means of the Madassery family.
Several people likewise resolved to save their lives

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[9] The area of Nilambur was again badly hit in 2019 by heavy floods and landslides (Naha 2019).
[10] Abdullah and Abinshah (2015: 42, 55).

Carried pillows, mats, some coins, chicken, mortars, and winnows,
And were seeking shelter at Chimoon's house in Mannutodika.
But women and children were crying out,
"The water is rising here too!"
Prompting many people to let go of their stuff,
to haphazardly shelter anywhere, even in bungalows.
(Abdullah and Abinshah 2015: 55)

This account is almost journalistic in its enumeration of casualties or their lack thereof, albeit its religious framing. It credits by name those affluent people providing shelter for flood refugees, while relating to risk assessment and decisions to take or leave property behind or enter a bungalow without permission. The sense of urgency highlighted throughout the verse is heightened by describing the flood refugees entering the bungalow, a colonial residential area purposefully kept at a higher ground, segregated from indigenous residential areas (King 1975: 47–48). Such verses are comparable to ethnographic descriptions of immediate responses to disaster (Lauer 2012: 179–81, Carlin and Park-Fuller 2012), but the poet-ethnographer of *Flood* is embedded within his own composition-cum-ethnography, zooming in unto his own community in the seventh *ishal*. The poet shifts to prose for describing the relief operation to purchase grain supplies from Calicut, thirty miles away westwards, to provide his own village, Areekode. As all the roads are flooded, the only way is sailing along the river with gushing floodwater threatening to carry the boat away to the ocean. The thrilling drama is reflected in suspended lengthy, winding subordinate clauses enabled by serial verb constructions and participial phrases. These subordinated clauses are reproduced here as separate sentences in English for the sake clarity, at the expense of the suspense generated by the single, lengthy chain of verbal and adjectival phrases preceding the main verb phrase at the finite sentence position.

> "Now, if all the rice we can purchase here is consumed before the floodwaters recede, there is no way to replenish the rice supplies. Everyone will starve to death." This was intensely distressful for the venerable Nur Husain Chaudhari Sahib and Mr. M. M. Yakko Sayippu. Sahib was a Punjabi merchant who was, at the time, staying here in Areekode with Pareekuttayi. He came from Punjab to run the coir business of the Jami'a Committee made of important citizens in the renowned city of Pune, to support the poor people of Areekode. Mr. M. M. Yakko Sayippu was the secretary of the YMCA Company. He was running weaving workshops of silk and spun cloth in exchange of timber and rice-grain revenue for those left destitute here in Areekode and other places after the Eranad Rebellion. These two merchants were ready to buy twenty sacks of rice grains from Calicut, thirty miles away by sailing down the river from this Areekode
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> (Abdullah and Abinshah 2015: 63).

The decision-making process described above in response to the unfolding disaster formulates disaster management from the perspective of bottom-up and local self-governance organisations (cf. Raman 2020: 325–26). It starts with expressing the concern of two merchants—one is a Muslim merchant from Punjab, Nur Husain Chaudhari, and the other is a Christian manufacturer, Yakko Sayippu—each is affiliated to a faith-based organisation, the Islamic Jami'a committee and the Young Male Christian Association respectively. They both run businesses for supporting the local population affected by the devastating impact of the anticolonial revolt, the Malabar Rebellion of 1921/1922 (Menon 1967 [2006]: 360–61, Gopalankutty 1989). Remarkably, the trade network run by Muslim and Christian merchants in response to colonial oppression is activated in response to the climate-induced disaster,

offering an important lesson on the potential for intercommunal solidarity to contribute to resilience when the community at large faces external threats.

However, these two business leaders depend on a wider, all-inclusive process of decision making:

> As these matters were reported to the market-town leaders, they all said in great distress: "The whole country has been turned into an ocean. If you sail now to Calicut, you risk drifting into the sea without reaching Calicut, and therefore, even if we all starve here to death, we must not send you to get rice grains and other supplies in the current situation." Hearing of the disrupted plan, one of them said:[11] "Since I go to help the unfortunate people, firmly trusting the All-Merciful God to protect me, I will safely reach Calicut, purchase the rice and return quickly, Insha'Allah." Hearing this courageous statement, the leaders decided there was no use in objecting. They deposited issues such as worry, anxiety, and distress in the golden box of trust in God, and locked it with the key of prayer, "Oh Allah! Take care of our needs!" Thus, it was agreed to permit this righteous person to sail to Calicut (Abdullah and Abinshah 2015: 63).

The disaster response is thus explicitly guided by faith, while the continued impact of the flood, as opposed to the sudden cyclone in the *Typhoon Ballad*, enables community organisation to process collaborative response mechanism, in which the poet too, Mundambara Unnimammad, participates as the events unfold.

> Then, the important, beloved, and wealthy Unni Muhammad, the most venerable man in the ancient house called Mundambara, called out and asked: "Who will take the coir luggage of these two people to Calicut on a first-class boat, built to resist any cracks, and return the boat back here for helping us?" The situation, however, was such that no one was ready to do this, not even for fees worth ten lakhs of gold pounds, as they all cherished their own life above all. Finally, three men of strength and courage rose as one from among the crowd. They were Arinjeerimmal Kuttoosakutti, Kunnalath Ahammad, and Methalayil Mammad from the port town adjoining Areekode called Pattanapuram. They said: "By the command of the beloved God no harm will occur to endanger our life, so we are ready to go on this journey (Abdullah and Abinshah 2015: 63).

The three volunteers were all from the nearby town, with a small wharf connecting the river to the marketplace. They are mentioned by name, while the God, *arima-thiru-paran* (loved and venerable Lord), remains unspecified to include all the faith communities in the audience.

Flood may signal a peak in the evolution of Arabi-Malayalam disaster literature, after which disasters generated shorter, less detailed Arabi-Malayalam ballads like *Flood Ballad* of 1961 discussed next.

Flood Ballad

The *Flood Ballad* is composed by Pulatt Pulikkottil Haidar (b. 1879) and penned down by his best friend Ahmed Molla, who was living off selling the printed copies of Haidar's compositions. *Flood Ballad* constitutes two relatively short *ishal*s narrating the 1961 floods that wreaked havoc in Kerala and other Indian states. Even though *Flood Ballad* originated in Malappuram

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[11] It is probably an implicit reference to the Punjabi merchant who later joins the people embarking on the perilous journey.

district, home to the poet's native place, Wandoor, it describes the impact of and response to a disaster that affected the whole country on a much broader scale. The flood described hits the country in a period that produced meteorological and disaster records readily available, allowing us to compare the poet's experience of the flood with the perspective of governmental agencies as narrated, for example, in the CWC Report (2018: 2–3):

> [T]he year 1961 [...] witnessed heavy floods and rise in the water levels of reservoirs. Usually in the State [of Kerala], heavy precipitation is concentrated over a period of 7 to 10 days during the monsoon when the rivers rise above their established banks and inundate the low-lying areas. But in 1961, floods were unusually heavy not only in duration, but also in the intensity of precipitation. During the year 1961, the monsoon started getting violent towards the last week of June and in the early days of August [sic!],[12] the precipitation was concentrated on most parts of the southern region of Kerala. By the first week of July, the intensity gradually spread over the other parts of the State and the entire State was reeling under severe flood by the second week of July. The worst affected area was Periyar sub-basin and it also impacted other sub-basins.

The *Flood Ballad*, like the *Typhoon Ballad*, states the date right at the outset according to the Malayalam Kollam era leaving out the Hijri dates, which would be expected in an Arabi-Malayalam composition.[13]

In the Kollam year of 1136 (=1961)
When we suffered
A massive flood disaster,
Hills and mountains burst, embankments collapsed,
Soil and stones washed the sandy paddy fields,
Such an excessive destruction befell us!
The rain was heavy with ceaseless downpours,
The water was forceful; canals and rivers
Poured into paddy fields, the roads too were inundated,
Flowing into our homes, walls sank under water,
Cracking and breaking, full houses collapsed.[14]

According to the records, the neighbouring district, Calicut, topped the charts in terms of extreme rainfall, with 234 mm for a single day in mid-July 1961, an average rainfall of 56% above normal (CWC 2018: 2). The poem, accordingly, reflects the devastating impact on the landscape, as well as the agrarian and urban environments:

As homes fully collapsed, all their belongings
Were abandoned.
All their property was submerged in water.
Makeshift boats and bamboo rafts
Were built and taken over to the river,
But all the joints broke, and they sank in the water.
So many people left their homes
To stay in the forest. Mighty bridges and roads

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[12] The reference here must be to July.

[13] We owe this observation to an anonymous reviewer, and leave the question of the reasons behind this choice for a future study.

[14] The translation is based on the text reproduced online in Mathrubhumi 2018 after Karassery 1979 [2007]. Accessed on: 04.12.2023.

Were washed away by the floodwaters.

It then proceeds to narrate the 'riskscape', to use Raman's (2020) term, the semi-urban environment typical of Kerala with domestic animals that are particularly vulnerable to floods. Their vulnerability translates into the resilience capacity of the affected community, whose livelihood depends on chicken, goats, and cows. Moreover, the corpses of animals in the floodwaters pose serious risk to health, especially the eruption of leptospirosis (Amitabha *et al*. 2019). The poet seems to be aware of further hazardous developments following floods while expressing innate perception of risk:

Swollen corpses were floating—
dogs and cats and chicken
And many goats, cows, and cattle—all perished.
The cattle perished, and water covered the paddy in the fields
All the plantain groves got rotten,
Severe damages incurred to the tapioca as well.

The official records corroborate this description: "Many of the important infrastructures like highways etc. were submerged. The damage caused by the floods had been severe and varied. It is understood that 115 people lost their lives due to floods and landslides. Over 50,000 houses were completely and partly damaged and about 1,15,000 acres of paddy were seriously affected" (CWS 2018: 2).

The *Flood Ballad* poignantly describes the disruption, an utter mishap in a world turned upside down:

All the transport ceased, paralysed.
Cars and buses, lorries and transport, all stopped
As if by all-pervasive transformation.
The same mishap that befell people drowning to death,
Was also met by snakes, pigs, monkeys, and deer.
Even elephants died.

Importantly, the poet explicitly presents his objective to educate and inform future generations on response to such disruptive disasters:

Then came the news of the massive disaster;
I am telling this long story for people to know in the future.
So, a boat capsized with a huge number of people drowning.
The corpses of the dead were hand-dug out of the mud.

The poet thus consciously transmits risk perception from one generation to the other, reflecting the motivation behind this unique Arabi-Malayalam literary genre. When compared to the *Typhoon Ballad* and *Flood*, the *Flood Ballad* is significantly less religious, possibly reflecting the *zeitgeist* of communist, secular Kerala of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Nevertheless, there are interesting markers of religiosity, such as attributing anger to the restless ocean, perceived by Kerala fisherfolk as a female entity, a sort of a mother goddess (*amma*, *kadalamma*) with emotions and 'bodiliness', (Hoeppe 2008: 308–9).

I say, the ocean turned furious,
Approaching the shore with roaring waves,
Inflicting so many more damages.

Like his predecessor Mundambara, Haidar too relates starving communities stranded with no access to food supplies:

That day all the shops and restaurants were shut,
And all businesses stopped.
Even a little bit of rice was nowhere to be found;
Women and children were stranded at home,
Starving with empty stomachs.
Such a disaster and so much more.

The second *ishal* highlights the national scale of the disaster and its impact in stark contradiction to the earlier compositions that focused on small, regional localities. Nevertheless, the poet also narrates disastrous landslides in specific places, Attappady and Kuttiady, that were hit by deadly landslides in 2018 and 2019 as well (Premlet 2019, Wadhawan *et al*. 2020).

The tragedy in Kerala and so many other places…
It is beyond comprehension and evaluation.
The losses that befell my Kerala by the disaster…
Only those I can enumerate.
In Attappady, a hill collapsed and brought calamity on people.
Then, in Kuttiady a mountain collapsed.
Since the mountain pass was blocked,
All the traffic between the two places was obstructed in both directions.

The uncanny nature of disasters is depicted in lines narrating the horrifying intrusion of wildlife into the human environment follows:

Moreover, a snake from the Eastern Mountain
Came afloat and fixed its camp on a tree.
Then one mighty crocodile floated and devoured
A buffalo calf that fell into the floodwaters.

The remaining lines proceed to relate to different places, some of which encountered in Unnimammad's *Flood*—Nilambur, Areekode, Edavana, and Calicut, to list a few. The poet goes beyond Kerala, naming big cities in the neighbouring states, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, equally affected the floods.

The multitude of houses that collapsed as the floodwaters rushed in,
Let's say, it was worst in quantity in Nilamboor,
Similar [events] reported from Vadapuram to Mampad,
So many houses had collapsed all at once in great quantity.
Besides houses, the Edavana Mosque suddenly
Fell gulped by the water and floated away.
The water gushed into Areekode, Vayakkad,
As well as Feroke, Kallayi, and Kozhikode.
As I said earlier, Malappuram and Thirurangadi,
Panambuzha, Anakkayam and Nooradi were all submerged in water.
Oh God! The force of the Bharata River water
Was impossible to withstand, causing massive destruction.
The massive destruction in North Malabar
Affected [as far south as] Alappuzha throughout the Kochi area.
Let me add that the seashore turned hostile,

The ocean angrily dashed against it with more water.
Thiruvithankoor was flooded as if washed clean,
Everything in Kollam was submerged under water.
There is a lot to tell, it's too difficult!
Kerala, Madras, Mysore… so many states
Suffered destruction in India.

In this overwhelmingly extensive disaster landscape, ocean and rivers transgress nation-state borders, leading the poet to conclude with a note on the mishandling of relief funds. While it is not entirely clear whether the criticism is directed against the Central Government or the Kerala government (but see Sreemol 2018), such complaints are often voiced after disasters hit, making this performative act of narrating disaster a political statement as well.

The mighty deficiency, however, should be told.
The relief fund for recovery
Was put aside and the government is giving out money;
The inspection is conducted by the powerful, but the money
Is too little.
All the remaining damages are neglected.
The destruction that befell our country by the gushing flood water…
Oh, God! Please deliver us quickly from this destruction, protect us all!

As already noted in passing, the *Flood Ballad* refrains from expressing religiosity, even if closely associated with the Muslim community by virtue of its generic affiliation to Arabi-Malayalam literature with Arabic loanwords and the typical *ishal* structure.[15] God is mentioned almost in passing, at the end of the poem, leaving the flooded world chaotic and inexplicable, turned upside down and uncanny. The *Flood Ballad* was indeed crafted in the crucible of Arabi-Malayalam poetry, but it adapted to the secular state of Kerala—merely a few years after its formation in 1956—when the massive flood disaster of 1961 struck.

Conclusion

The Arabi-Malayalam flood ballads attest tacit knowledge embedded in LINKS to inform bottom-up disaster management strategies. While disaster management tool kits can hardly be extracted from such literary traditions, as Lauer (2012) convincingly argues, their contribution to community resilience, ground-level response, and risk perception is undeniable. As demonstrated above, flood ballads transmit knowledge on participatory decision-making processes, organisational leadership skills, and communal collaborations in response to and recovery from disasters. In contrast to the modern novel and the hegemonic literary imagination criticised by Amitav Ghosh in the *Great Derangement* (2016), Arabi-Malayalam disaster narratives engage with the uncanny and unthinkable while exploring the agency of affected communities during disasters.

Arguably, disaster ballads in Arabi-Malayalam aesthetically formulate spontaneous post-disaster narratives that survivors and rescuers tell and retell publicly or privately. Some parallels can be drawn with narratives told by disaster survivors and rescuers in interviews. Thus, in an interview recorded in Chengal, Kalady (Central Kerala) three months after the 2018 flood disaster, Jisha (a 45-years old caretaker in a kindergarten) narrated a story of rescue

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[15] For the second *ishal* of *Flood Ballad* as performed by Theertha Suresh, see Old Is Gold Mappila Songs (2020): https://youtu.be/2_vnm-z4QAY, accessed 26.06.2023.

resonating Mundambara's account of spontaneously organised rescue, noting her own involvement while witnessing the event unfolding.

> There was this pregnant woman in our town, in our ward. Her house is that big house by the road. There were only her, her husband, and their little child in the house. They didn't think their house would be flooded, so they stayed home. Just the three of them. They didn't go anywhere else. But on the 16 [of August] too much water entered. As so much water got in, her husband got nervous. She was supposed to have her [caesarean] operation on August 20; she was close to give birth. He became extremely worried and decided to take her to the hospital by any means. So he went somewhere and brought a boat, and helped her on the boat. So this woman and her little child… oh, and that child had fever… and so she was on the boat at the front, and that child at the back, and many people—ten or twenty men—holding the boat and pushing it towards Kambani Padi along the road.[16] The water forcefully gushed through the road, so they slowly pushed the boat forward. But the current was really strong, and all of a sudden the boat capsized. One boy quickly got hold of the child and the woman, he could hardly stand, so strong was the current. It was frightening, he could have lost hold of them, and they would have been swept away by the current, that strong was the current. So he moved them towards the side of the [flooded] road, where there is this Chippy [mobile] shop, until he carefully manged to bring them close by. As I was watching all this, I got upset, so I quickly came rushing [downstairs] from the upper [floor] where we took shelter. I just held her, and she leaned on me, miserably, and I consoled her, 'no problem, don't worry', she was shivering, she trembled and shook, 'no worries, have no fear, whatever it takes they will get you to the hospital', I told her like that. Then from that little shop they brought an armchair and took her on that chair to the hospital in Kanjoor.[17]

Such survival and rescue stories must have been captured by Arabi-Malayalam poets and processed into versified disaster ballads. The *Typhoon Ballad* of 1909 and *Flood* of 1924 are especially rich with such descriptions compared with the *Flood Ballad* of 1961, possibly because by that time, the availability of mass media outlets from print media to radio broadcasts enabled disseminating survival and rescue stories, rendering traditional functions of disaster ballads such as disseminating information redundant.

In their study of disaster narratives recorded over a century of environmental disasters in the US, Phyllis Scott Carlin and Linda M. Park-Fuller (2012: 27) propose that "[...] disaster narratives criticize and open possibilities for responsible prevention, equal access to safety, warnings, escape routes, evacuation plans, rescue, property reclamation, and interpersonal support." Their proposal resonates with passages discussed above, like the criticism of unequal distribution of relief resources recorded in *Flood Ballad*. To recall, the poet's intention to shape disaster preparedness is explicit: "I am telling this long story for people to know in the future." But Carlin and Park-Fuller's study of ethno-dramas and playback theatre goes beyond grassroots-level disaster management mechanisms to analyse the *performative* aspects of disaster narratives. They suggest that performing disaster narratives "can radically re-contextualize the stories, amplify and texture the voices of the survivors, encourage audiences to reflection, and open the narratives to emergent viewpoints and speakers, fostering dialogue, debate, and social action" (ibid.: 22). In many respects, Arabi-Malayalam

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[16] Below the building where Jisha took shelter
[17] For Jisha's account see Gamliel (2019) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imuq2EHZGT8 00:01:07—00:04:26, accessed 26.06.2023.

flood ballads do precisely what Carlin and Park-Fuller attribute to the theatrical performances of disaster narratives told by affected people. Despite the close association of the linguistic register and script of Arabi-Malayalam compositions with Kerala's Muslim communities, their performative aspects—tunes, oral recitation—make them accessible to non-Muslims within the broader community. The references to Hindu and Christian individuals and groups as stakeholders within the disaster landscape highlight the inclusive, deliberately collaborative disaster management approach formulated by these compositions.

To conclude, disaster-oriented literature composed within and by community members is a powerful tool in fostering efficient, inclusive, and humane response to disasters with the potential to cultivate community resilience. Considering the environmental risks and hazards that climate change is currently exacerbating, we may benefit from studying such artistic formulations of disaster response mechanisms developed on the grassroots level of affected communities.

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