Poetics of Piety: Genre, Self-Fashioning, and the Mappila Lifescape[1]

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Notwithstanding a recent resurgence of scholarly interest in what one may call "Mappila Studies"—the body of scholarship on the Muslims of Malabar in the Malayalam-speaking South Indian state of Kerala—research on this community still leaves too much to be desired. As for the fate of Mappila *literary culture* within this incipient field of study, scholars have either given short shrift to or painted in broad brushstrokes the impressive literary legacy of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar despite its enormous historic/al and socio-cultural value.[2] That said, even the tiny array of scholarly works, mostly by Malayali scholars, that seeks to treat of Mappila literature has largely approached the subject, I argue, from a provincialised "literary" vantage point, thereby reducing the whole of Mappila narratives to mere aesthetic artifacts having no bearing upon the lives of Mappilas. I call this dominant paradigm of doing Mappila literature "literarisation"—that is, fetishising the "literariness" of text by privileging its formal, stylistic, and aesthetic features over its social tone and life. This view assumes text to be a domain of symbols separable from a domain of practice and disregards the social production of text which cannot be abstracted out from the materialities giving shape to it.[3]

In a clear departure from this normative understanding of Mappila literary culture which I find analytically shallow and reductive, this essay seeks to urge that Mappila devotional genres such as the *mawlud* and the *mala* be best appreciated as transformative practices that produce,

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[2] I employ the term "literary culture" throughout the essay not just descriptively but, more importantly, analytically as well. A literary culture is constituted by social practices of people composing, singing, reciting, reading, copying, printing, and circulating texts. See Sheldon Pollock, "Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History," *Public Culture*, 12: 3 (2000), pp. 591–625.

[3] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (ed.) Micahel Holquist, (tr.) Caryl Emerson and Micahel Holquist (Austin, 1981). Other reductionist lenses related to "literarisation" through which Mappila literature has been hitherto examined are "folklorisation" and "cultural syncretism." While syncretism is well known as a rubric of multidisciplinary use to characterise and examine cultural and religious exchange, interaction, and mixture, I want to briefly emphasise the two different senses in which I deploy the term "folklorisation". First, folklorisation as the act of reducing to a fixed, stable entity of folklore the literary cultures that straddle the conventional binaries of the written and the oral, the literary and the traditional. Second, drawing on Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, 2005), pp. 48–53, folklorisation as understanding literary cultures as a form of mere entertainment or as a means to simply express, rather than form, one's identity, religious or otherwise.

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rather than merely express, Mappila selfhood and subjectivity. While the *mawlud* refers to laudatory poetry interspersed with prose narratives written in Arabic that celebrates the birth and life of the Prophet Muhammad, and also of significant Islamic personalities, the *mala* designates a devotional poem in Arabi Malayalam extolling the virtues of important Islamic figures, including the Prophet Muhammad, but most commonly the Sufis, and historic Muslim events. In highlighting the mutual co-production of communities and narratives, I will bring to light in some ethnographic detail the constitutive role of genre in what I call the self-fashioning of Mappila Muslims of Kerala. Before embarking on the task of elaborating on the sociality of Mappilas, as expressed and forged by devotional performance genres which in turn are best construed as arts of the self, it is useful to begin with a brief discussion of the theoretical warp and weft upon which my analysis is woven.

Genres of the Self

When I posit that Mappila devotional genres such as the *mawlud* and the *mala* are generative—not merely expressive/symbolic—of ethical selfhood among Mappilas who inhabit the devotional performative world of these genres, I enfold, as well as uphold, a set of assumptions about literary genre, performance/embodiment and self-fashioning, not least of ethical consequence. These throw into question the dominant interpretive grid of what I have termed "literarisation" above which has so far informed Mappila literary studies (and of which I provide an example below). I view text or genre as practice rather than as idea and consequently I seek to understand text/genre taking on board its formative relation to context.[4] This notion helps me to conceptualise text or genre not as merely expressive of a *pre-existing* surround or locus, but as equally constitutive of contexts and cultural formations.

The terms "self-fashioning" and "ethical formation" that stand out in my analysis are evidently inspired by the highly influential work of Michel Foucault on power/knowledge, subjectivity and technologies of the self, and ethics. After Foucault, we no longer apprehend power as a merely repressive and restrictive external force but as an enabling, internal relationship—that is, power as potentiality, the capacity to enact something in relation to other persons, things, institutions, and so on.[5] As Colin Gordon rightly notes, crucial to Foucault's analytics of power are his two ideas of the "*productivity of power*" and the "*constitution of subjectivity through power relations*" where power relations involve not just repression and limitation but also "the intention to teach, to mold conduct, to instill forms of self-awareness and identities".[6]

In his investigation into subject formation—the way a human being "turns him- or herself into a subject"[7]—Foucault draws our attention to what he calls "technologies of the self":

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[4] See William Hanks, "Text and Textuality," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 18 (1989), pp. 95–127; and Rich Freeman, "Genre and Society: The Literary Culture of Premodern Kerala" in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, (ed.) Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley, 2003), pp. 436–500.

[5] Talal Asad, "The Trouble of Thinking: An Interview with Talal Asad" in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, (ed.) David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford, 2006), pp. 243–303.

[6] Colin Gordon, "Introduction" in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, (ed.) James Faubion, (tr.) Robert Hurley et al (New York, 2000), p. xix; original emphasis).

[7] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power" in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, (ed.) Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York, 2003), p. 126.

> (Technologies that) "permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.[8]

In other words, these technologies are the intellectual and practical procedures, instruments and tools suggested or prescribed to human beings in order for them to mould and govern their ways of being human. As Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose[9] have pointed out, in Foucault's scheme of things "ethics" is understood in terms of the techniques, practices and procedures through which a subject works upon herself, thereby transforming herself into the willing subjects of a certain moral discourse. In fashioning her own self, the subject of Foucault's analysis is acting within a field of constraints, however—that is, he is not talking about a free, autonomous subject who crafts her/- self independently (of other persons, things, institutions, and so on). Instead, the subject for Foucault is constituted within the bounds of what he describes as "modes of subjectivation"—the ways in which the "individual establishes his relationship to the rule and recognises himself as obligated to put it into practice."[10] In this view, human beings are enjoined or summoned to recognise their moral obligations through a system of order such as divine law or rational rule. Note that Foucault's idea of modes of subjectivation characteristic of ethical formation points up the relations of domination and structures of authority through which a subject transforms herself in order to realise a teleological model within a particular life world.[11] As there are different modes of subjectivation, of establishing one's relations to oneself through obedience to a moral code, Foucault's analysis of ethical formation urges that we examine the specific morphology—the contours and character— of ethical practices in order to understand the kind of ethical subject fashioned through such practices. These practices are best understood as techniques or arts of existence that include embodied acts and ways of one's daily conduct in life. Significantly, the idea of techniques of the self emphasises the *ethical work* these techniques perform in creating subjectivity rather than the *signification* they carry for their practitioners.

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[8] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self" in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, (ed.) Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York, 2003), p. 146.

[9] Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, "Introduction: Foucault Today" in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, (ed.) Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York, 2003), pp. vii-xxxv.

[10] Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Vol 2 of The History of Sexuality*, (tr.) Robert Hurley (New York, 1985), p. 27. "Mode of subjectivation" is the second component of Foucault's fourfold scheme of ethics [or "the ethical fourfold," to use Paul Rabinow, "Introduction" in Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984, (ed.) Paul Rabinow, (tr.) Robert Hurley et al (New York, 1997), p. xxvii], the first being "ethical substance," third "ethical work," and the fourth "telos." The ethical substance refers to "the way in which the individual has to constitute this or that part of himself as the prime material of his moral conduct," for example, the human body; ethical work is the work that "one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one's conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behavior"—in short, the various techniques of the self such as sexual austerity and renunciation of pleasures, to cite Foucault's examples; and the telos of the ethical subject is the establishment of a "moral conduct that commits an individual . . . to a certain mode of being . . . characteristic of the ethical subject". Thus for Foucault, one's relation to oneself—i. e., self-formation as an "ethical subject"—is "a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal." This process demands that the individual "act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself." Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure,* pp. 26–28.

[11] The paradox of subjectivation in Foucault's conception of the subject is revealing: it is through *subjection* that a *subject* is formed—in other words, the capacity for action is made possible and produced through specific relations of subordination.

Foucault's conception of ethical formation in turn takes its inspiration from a larger, much older tradition of ethics that we call Aristotelian. For Aristotle, moral virtues are acquired through habituation—"as a result of habit".[12] This involves a coordination of outward behaviours, including bodily acts, and inward dispositions through the repeated performance of acts that contain those specific virtues. Key to the conceptual architecture of Aristotelian moral thinking that has influenced both Christian and Islamic tradition is the notion of *habitus*—a concept first introduced into the social sciences by Marcel Mauss[13] and popularised by Pierre Bourdieu.[14] *Habitus* is about ethical formation made possible by a certain pedagogical process through which a moral disposition is acquired. This process entails the acquisition of a virtue by a person through consistent physical exertion, assiduous practice, and discipline such that this virtue becomes permanently enmeshed and sedimented in the person's character. Drawing on Mauss's formulation of *habitus* in his essay "Body Techniques", cultural anthropologist Talal Asad employs *habitus* to refer to the "predisposition of the body", to its "traditional sensibilities"—to "that aspect of a tradition in which specific virtues are defined and an attempt is made to cultivate and enact them."[15] One can see an echo of this principle in the fourteenth century Muslim thinker Ibn Khaldun's (d. 1406) notion of "*malaka*". As Ibn Khaldun puts it, "A (*malaka*) is a firmly rooted quality acquired by doing a certain action and repeating it time after time, until the form of (that action) is firmly fixed. A (*malaka*) corresponds to the original (action after which it was formed)."[16] The notion of *habitus,* therefore, brings to relief the constitutive role of conscious, repeated performance of actions—virtuous or otherwise—in forging and augmenting subjectivities.[17]

There is, of course, a fascinating body of contemporary scholarship that explores aspects of ethical self-formation enabled through *embodied* and *ensouled* practices, (where the material body forms the site of human action and experience, and the living human body becomes an integrated whole having "developable means" for accomplishing a range of human goals[18]), along lines of inquiry inspired and opened up by Aristotelian moral thought. Of this, I wish to single out the work of two socio-cultural anthropologists Saba Mahmood[19] and Charles Hirschkind[20] who have deepened and enriched our understanding of the constitutive relationship between bodily acts and ethical self-improvement central to contemporary forms of Muslim religiosity. In her ethnography of the elaborate program of self-cultivation practiced by the women's mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood focuses on the bodily, technical capacities demanded by self-formation and on the particular conception of the body, personhood, and politics these capacities presuppose, engender, and construct. Likewise, Charles Hirschkind analyses at ethnographic length the practice of ethical cassette sermon listening among men associated with the Islamic Revival in contemporary Egypt as part of a practical tradition for the formation of a *pious sensorium*—a sensorium that has developed the somatic and affective potentialities that enable virtuous dispositions.

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[12] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd edition, (tr.) David Ross (Oxford, 2009), p. 23.

[13] Marcel Mauss, "Body Techniques," in *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*, Marcel Mauss, (tr.) Ben Brewster (London, 1979), pp. 95–120.

[14] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977).

[15] Asad, "The Trouble of Thinking," p. 289. See also Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), pp. 75–76; and Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, 2003), pp. 251–52.

[16] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, (tr.) Franz Rosenthal (New York, 1958), p. 346. In considering the classical Islamic tradition of *adab* as the foundation of the soul or personality of the human being as a whole, Ira Lapidus explores the Khaldunian idea of *malaka/habitus* along with the relevant work of classical Muslim scholars Miskawaih (d. 1030) and al- Ghazzali (d. 1111). *Adab* in this tradition means correct knowledge and behaviour in the entire process by which an individual is trained, guided, and fashioned into a good Muslim. Ira Lapidus, "Knowledge, Virtue and Action: The Classical Muslim Conception of Adab and the Nature of Religious Fulfillment in Islam," in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, (ed.) Barbara Metcalf (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 38–61.

[17] While illuminating the conception of *salat* (ritual prayer) guiding the Egyptian women's mosque movement, Saba Mahmood also draws on the Aristotelian formulation of *habitus,* which means "an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person." Mahmood, *Politics of Piety,* p. 136. For Mahmood's critique of Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* for its inherent socioeconomic determinism and inattention to the pedagogical process entailed in *habitus*-formation, see *ibid.,* pp. 138–139.

Both these ethnographies explore at length practices such as ritual prayer, veiling, and cassette sermon audition directed at the cultivation of Islamic conduct in which painful emotions—for instance, virtuous fear (*taqwa*)—are integral to the practice of ethical formation. Notably, as their ethnographic vignettes underscore, these emotions are regarded not as mere stimuli for action but formative of action itself. These emotions are also understood to be an indispensable means for the cultivation of virtues and pious dispositions required to become a devout Muslim. Moreover, in this economy of ethical-formation, ritual performance serves both as a means and as an end, and exteriority is considered to be as a means to interiority, in stark contrast to the modern, secular notion of the separation between public exteriority and private interiority.[21]

I find the conceptual insights that Mahmood and Hirschkind provide into the constitutive relationship between (ritual) performance and self-cultivation particularly handy for examining the texture of ethical self-fashioning engendered by the performative dimensions of the literary culture of Mappila Muslims of Kerala—that is, for exploring the ways in which recitation of devotional performance genres such as the *mawlud* and the *mala* by Mappilas, as I argue in this essay, not only reflects but also forges the kinds of pious dispositions and virtuous affects required of the performers to become good Muslims. While I exploit their analytics to the full, my work also departs from theirs in certain respects which I want to briefly mention here. First, whereas both Mahmood and Hirschkind focus on the practices of cultivating Islamic conduct in which *painful* emotions such as fear and remorse are regarded as central to the practice of moral discrimination, it is love, joy, and reverence for the extolled such as the Prophet Muhammad and Sufi figures—*pleasant* emotions if you will—that are integral to the practice of ethical formation enabled by Mappila devotional narratives with which I am concerned in this essay. Note that my point is not that the endurance of pain is inconsequential in a programme of self-cultivation for Mappila Muslims. Instead, I simply want to say that it is explicitly the virtue of love and similar emotions that one feels and experiences for the objects of veneration in devotional narratives that are both expressed and enacted in pious recitative practices. What I take from Mahmood and Hirschkind is the insight permeating their work which, when translated into the context of my problematic, means that the practice of reciting devotional narratives by Mappilas does not issue from an *always already* love that exists in the reciters for the venerated figures of these narratives but it is also *through* such practice that virtuous love and similar emotions are created and bodied forth, as I shall explain shortly. Second, while both Mahmood and Hirschkind have analyzed aspects of the programme of ethical self-fashioning associated with the Islamic Revival which is largely dismissive of Sufi devotional practices such as the *mawlud*, in probing the morphology of Mappila self-fashioning in this essay I focus my attention on what I call the transformative practices made possible by overtly Sufi-inspired devotional narratives that live a controversial existence within the Islamic tradition.[22] Finally, (and this applies to Hirschkind), while acknowledging the development and formation of the virtues facilitated by sermon audition, Hirschkind, however, wants to theorise this practice at the level of the somatic more than the programmatic—that is, as he puts it, the practice of sermon audition enables "less honed dispositions . . . than the somatic and affective potentialities" that sustain such dispositions.[23] In contrast, insomuch as I deal with the practice of reciting devotional narratives among Muslims of Malabar, I am mainly concerned with a disciplinary programme geared to the task of developing and forming virtues, as is the case with Quranic recitation, for example—although the *mawlud* and *mala* performance can also be, and indeed is, an avenue for the practice of ethical listening that is best explored in terms of its somatics rather than its programmatics, as Hirschkind has rightly argued. Even as my concerns in this essay diverge from those of Mahmood's and Hirschkind's at the level of thematics, the analytic labour of my study largely owes it to their illuminating work on questions of embodiment/ensoulment and ethical formation.

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[18] See Asad, *Genealogies of Religion,* p. 76; and *idem,* 'Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's "The Meaning and End of Religion,"' *History of Religions* 40: 3 (2001), pp. 205–222.

[19] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety.*

[20] Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York, 2006).

[21] See Mahmood, *Politics of Piety,* pp. 131–139.

In what follows I analyze, through brief ethnographic portrayal, the ritual performance of devotional narratives by contemporary Mappila Muslims of Malabar and how this performance tradition maps onto a programme of self-cultivation that is central to the performers' conception of being a pious Muslim. In so doing, I want to highlight the constitutive role of Mappila literary culture—devotional literary genres in particular—in the formation of an ethical selfhood among Mappilas. I also want to urge that the devotional performance narratives such as the ones I am presently concerned with should be apprehended and appreciated not through the lens of an abstract "literarisation" which reduces these narratives to mere cultural artifacts having no bearing upon one's daily conduct in life—a lens that also relegates these narratives to a putative realm of private, individual consumption. Instead—and here I stress—they should be explored with adequate attention to their social production and performative dimensions which enable a particular life world where the literary is reducible neither to the performative nor to the aesthetic.

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[22] This should not be taken to mean that Islamic Revival movements such as the one studied by Mahmood and Hirschkind do not show any influence of Sufism. Indeed, as Hirschkind notes, the contemporary *da'wa* movement in Egypt has incorporated the Sufi-inspired tradition of "linking the realization of ethical being with the resonant body," while rejecting many aspects of Islamic mysticism. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape,* p. 102.

[23] *Ibid.,* p. 82.

That is to say, a proper understanding of devotional performance genres of Mappila literary culture also requires a profound sensitivity on our part to the *ethical work* they perform on Mappila selves, to the accomplishment of which the *poetics* of these narratives is no less crucial.[24]

My specific argument is that Mappila devotional performance genres like the *mawlud* and the *mala* are best understood as transformative practices in which the reciter-performer not only enacts a special relationship with the object of veneration in these genres—the Prophet, Sufis, etc.—but also develops and cultivates pious dispositions such as the virtuous love and reverence for the extolled. While the *mawlud* is usually recited collectively rather than individually on various occasions like the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, of death anniversaries of Sufi figures, housewarming, wake, etc., the *mala* is more often than not sung individually seeking fulfilment of certain needs or desires such as protection against maladies, or for its general meritorious value. However, to flesh out my argument in this essay, I focus my attention on the performative aspects of the *mawlud* rather than the *mala,* although my analysis will be equally consequential for an understanding of the latter as well. My preference for the former over the latter is twofold. First, practically, I cannot deal with the performative dimensions of both these genres in ethnographic detail within the spatial confines of this essay. Second, I find the *mawlud*, contra the *mala,* the most "untouchable" of topics in Mappila literary/cultural studies and therefore the most deserving of critical attention.[25]

The Ethnographic Entanglement

My ethnographic observations on which I pivot my analysis of the constitutive relationship between devotional narratives and ethical formation come out of a number of recitations of the *mawlud* that I have attended and participated in over a period of five years in various parts of Malappuram district in south Malabar.[26] This apart, at a more personal level, I have found myself part of this tradition of Islamic devotionalism from a very early age. In fact, I grew up in a family and community of Mappilas in South Malabar whose daily life was punctuated by recitations of devotional narratives such as the *mawlud* and the *mala.* I have grown up hearing my own father, a wage earner, singing the *mala* and reciting the *mawlud* and other devotional poems at the fall of night almost every day without fail—a tradition he keeps up to this day. I have also heard my mother, who is mostly consigned to household tasks, singing devotional songs in Arabic and Arabi Malayalam. Most often, they both would sing from the prayer manual called *sabeena* (see below), and on occasions they would simply chant from memory. And the same story can be told of many Mappila households not only in my hometown but also elsewhere. The result is inevitable: nested within the interstices of my ethnographic descriptions are traces of my long personal entanglement and enmeshment in Mappila devotional life that has been formative of my own *relation* with *myself*—my ethical selfhood if you will. The lines separating participant-observer from informant collapse as I enter into the spirit of the *mawlud*s I have *professionally* observed as an ethnographer and come to speak the same language as my informants. Therefore, if my own voice, as distinct from my scholarly voice, is also audible in the din of my ethnographic minutia, that is because I have no ethnographic "other" to confront in the first place—in studying and writing about Mappilas and their devotional performance narratives, I have also studied and written about *myself* as a Mappila. I know this situation has its own cost but I do not think that intellectual labour should necessarily be quarantined from life, that if one practices what one studies, then one *cannot* study it "critically" .

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[24] It should now be clear that my point is not to privilege the ethical performance of Mappila devotional genres at the expense of their aesthetic, stylistic dimensions. My point is simply this: to understand the true "literariness" of Mappila devotional genres, one also needs to take serious note of the performative value of these genres which is in turn facilitated and sustained by the aesthetic and stylistic features of these genres. The dominant tendency in Mappila literary studies is to valorise the formal stylistics of texts at the cost of their social life.

[25] This is not to say that the *mala* genre has been extensively, if not exhaustively, studied. In fact, the performative dimensions of the *mala* have received scant scholarly attention—and this is an issue I try to address in my larger work-in-progress on Mappila literary culture. Yet, the *mala* as a popular type of Mappila songs has been widely celebrated in contemporary Mappila scholarship, although this celebration has largely remained blind to the social production of the genre. Cf. Balakrishnan Vallikkunnu, *Mappilappattu: Oramugha Padhanam* (Calicut, 1999); and *idem, Mappila Sahityavum Muslim Navotdhanavum* (Calicut, 2008). In contrast, the *mawlud* has received a raw deal, as it were—there is not even an adequate acknowledgment, let alone celebration, of this genre in mainstream writing on Mappila culture. Cf. C. N. Ahmad Moulavi and K. K. Muhammad Abdul Kareem, *Mahathaya Mappila Sahitya Parambaryam* (Calicut, 1978); and P. K. Muhammad Kunhi, *Musliminkalum Kerala Samskaravum* (Thrissur, 1982).

[26] Needless to say, in the interests of confidentiality, I have changed all the proper nouns referring to institutions and *mawlud* attendees that figure in the essay. Also, all translations from Malayalam and Arabic are mine, unless otherwise noted.

Also, the devotional practices such as recitation of the *mawlud* and the *mala* are still so common a scene in Mappila religious lifescape that many Mappilas who participate in such practices do not even consider them a subject worthy of enquiry. Indeed, this take-it-for-granted attitude on the part of Mappilas towards ritual performances that animate their daily life was made clear to me in many standard comments I received from several of my informants when I told them that my research concerned the *mawlud* and the *mala*. Some would greet me with a shrug of shoulders, giving the impression that there was nothing one could actually research about so familiar, "invisible" and quotidian a practice. Others would pity me for "wasting" a hard-won research opportunity on such an "uninteresting", "old-fashioned" topic. However, my own conviction is that it is important to make *strange* this *familiarity,* to render *visible* this *invisibility,* if we are to cast light on the rich morphology of the devotional practices internal to the architecture of ethical self-fashioning in contemporary Keralite Islam. This essay is an attempt, in a preliminary way, at this kind of defamiliarisation and making visible of some of the familiar yet invisible aspects of Mappila literary culture.

Against "*Literarisation*"

Be that as it may, what piqued my interest the most and then pitchforked me into this study was the sheer absence of any substantive discussion on the devotional, performative aspects of Mappila literary culture in mainstream scholarship on Mappila literature, despite the centrality of the performance genres to the fashioning of devotional piety among Mappilas. I found that most, if not all, scholars of Mappila literature betray profound discomfort with the performative dimensions of Mappila literary culture. A main reason for this discomfort, as I discovered, owes to a particular religiously-inspired antagonism toward Sufi-based devotional practices that shapes the attitude of Mappila scholars who have studied Mappila literary culture so far. That is, the *mawlud* and the *mala* as both devotional genres and practices live a controversial existence in Keralite Islam and their religious legitimacy is both defended and contested within the Islamic tradition.[27]

But most studies of Mappila literary culture have been carried out by writers who represent the "opposing" side of this internal debate within the tradition, however. I am thinking here of the influential work of C. N. Ahmad Moulavi and K. K. Muhammad Abdul Kareem entitled *Mahathaya Mappila Sahitya Parambaryam* (The Great Mappila Literary Tradition) published by the authors themselves in 1978. I have no intention to discredit as unimportant a work such as this which has left an indelible mark on the emerging field of Mappila literary studies. In fact, Moulavi and Kareem painstakingly undertook a study of Mappila literary culture at a time when this topic was greatly under researched. Their work still remains a reference point in contemporary scholarship on Mappila literature. However, the merits of Moulavi and Kareem's work should not obscure for us from view the analytical traps within it: both Moulavi and Kareem are highly insensitive to the performative aspects of Mappila devotional genres such as the *mawlud* and the *mala*. While there is a total silence in their work on the thick texture of the *mawlud* performance, their treatment of the *mala* is marred by an urge—propelled by their "reformist" zeal—to reject the genre and its recitative use as a deviant practice with little or no place in what they consider to be "normative" Islam.[28]

The dismissive attitude of Moulavi and Kareem toward devotional narratives underwrites their entire discussion of the subject in the book. For example, while acknowledging the artistic merit of *Muhyiddin Mala* (1607), the earliest extant example of the Arabi Malayalam *mala* genre, Moulavi and Kareem smuggle in their ideological dis-ease with devotional piety characteristic of the text: "But, the Quran will never allow one to accept the ideas that this short poem contains."[29] I should clarify that my worry here is not the religious legitimacy of these contentious genres as such—to *prove* or *disprove* whether they are "correct" Islamic practices. I am rather worried about the violence in the form of an epistemic foreclosure that such a religiously motivated attitude visits upon any attempt to understand and engage Mappila literary culture of which devotional practices are a constitutive part. In other words, I am concerned with and about the tendency among scholars like Moulavi and Kareem to preempt any adequate engagement with Mappila literary culture by reading theological legitimacy and authenticity into the devotional performance genres of this culture such as the *mawlud* and the *mala*. This tendency is even more disquieting in that it has come to serve as the normative way to do Mappila literature to date—a tendency that sits comfortably with the approach of "literarisation" to Mappila devotional genres by which these genres are reduced to mere cultural objects through an exclusive focus on their formal, stylistic and aesthetic features at the expense of the performative world these genres not only inhabit but also enable.[30]

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[27] It is beyond the scope of this essay to dwell on the arguments and counter-arguments on the religious legitimacy of the *mawlud* and the *mala* as they are played out in debates among Mappilas who either uphold or reject these contentious practices. Since my interest in the essay is to explore what devotional genres *do* to those Mappilas for whom these genres are integral to the overall programme of realising what they take to be a pious Muslim, I do not have anything to say about this debate here except to note that (a) both sides of the debate invoke orthodoxy or models of "correct practice" in support of their conflicting arguments and consequently I see this debate and contestation as an inherent aspect of the "discursive tradition" of Islam, to follow Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington D. C., 1986), pp. 14–17—as a sign of the vibrancy of the tradition rather than a sign of its crisis; (b) both the practitioners and their detractors operate within different "semeiotic ideologies" that presuppose different assumptions about the (mediated) relationship between God and human beings via revered Islamic figures such as the Prophet and Sufis—ideologies that are, nonetheless, anchored in the Islamic tradition; on "semiotic ideology," see Webb Keane, "Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things," *Language and Communication* 23: 2–3 (2003), pp. 409–425; and *idem, Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley, 2007).

[28] Incidentally, C. N. Ahmad Moulavi (d. 1993) is himself a prominent leader of the *Mujahid* movement in Keralite Islam that strongly opposes "traditional" Islamic practices such as the *mawlud,* saint veneration, and shrine visitation. See Roland Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends* (Madras, 1976); and E. K. Ahmad Kutty, "The Mujahid Movement and Its Role in the Islamic Revival in Kerala" in *Kerala Muslims: A Historical Perspective*, (ed.) Asghar Ali Engineer (Delhi, 1995), pp. 69–72.

[29] Moulavi and Kareem, *Mahathaya Mappila Sahitya Parambaryam,* p. 153.

"Peace Be unto You, O Prophet": The Mappila *Mawlud* and Cultivation of Virtuous Love

The Arabic word "*mawlid,*" which popularly refers to the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (*mawlid al-nabi*), is used to designate both the observance and celebration of his birthday (also known as *milad*), and the literary genre appropriate for recitation on such occasion.[31] However, Mappilas more commonly use the term "*mawlud*" which in local parlance appears to be a slight corruption of *mawlid*, the classical Arabic word for the observance of the Prophet's birthday, rather than refers to the related Arabic noun of the same construction (i. e. *mawlud*) which means "new-born child"—hence my use of *mawlud* rather than *mawlid* throughout this essay to emphasise the former's popular use in Malabar, though people who are conversant with Arabic may find it easy to dub this usage a misnomer.[32] Also, by extension, other revered Islamic personalities such as the martyrs of the Battle of Badr and Sufi figures all have *mawlud*s written in their honour, although my focus in this essay will be on *mawlud*s of the Prophet.

A typical *mawlud* gathering in Malabar is a group of men (and women)[33] who are seated on the floor of a house/mosque, for example, in a circular or semicircular fashion where incense burns throughout, and sometimes perfume changes hands from one corner of the room to the other.[34] Usually, the *mawlud* is led by a team of *musliyar*s (religious teachers, usually employed at local madrasas/mosques) in front of whom is placed some adorned pillow or decorative cloth to hold the prayer manual from which to recite a particular *mawlud* text.

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[30] For a sampling of this "literarisation" approach, see Kunhi, *Musliminkalum*; and Vallikkunnu, *Mappilappattu,* and *idem, Mappila Sahityavum.*

[31] I am aware of the other uses of the word "*mawlid*" or "*mulid*" such as the death/birth anniversaries of Sufi saints popular in many parts of the Muslim world. While *mawlid/mawlud* as a literary form thematising the life and virtues of martyrs (*shuhada*) and Sufi saints is also well-known in Kerala, the word is not usually used to refer to the observance and celebration of the death anniversaries of Sufis and other revered Muslim figures. Instead, the Malayalam word "*nercha*" (literally, "vow") is the common name for this practice of saint veneration, although the word *urus*, a corruption of the Arabic *'urs,* (literally "wedding"), which is much popular among the rest of Muslims on the Indian subcontinent as a term to signify celebration of a Sufi's death anniversary, is also now gaining some traction among Mappilas. Interestingly, it is the birth in the case of the Prophet and the death in the case of revered martyrs and Sufi figures that more usually serve as the occasion for annual devotional festivity for Mappilas as elsewhere in many Muslim societies.

[32] It is interesting that even Mappila religious scholars called "musliyars" who are aware of the semantic nuances of both *mawlid* and *mawlud* sometimes prefer the latter in their sermons and conversations. Thus, instead of seeing this as a misnomer coming out of Mappilas' lack of command of Arabic, I want to see it as a means by which Mappilas domesticated and made their own the Arabic *mawlid* narratives and the larger Muslim practice of the *mawlid* celebration. Not unlike *mawlid,* the word "*mawlud"* indicates both the festive practice of the observance of the Prophet's birthday and the literary form tied to such practice among Mappilas.

[33] It is men who participate in *mawluds* held at mosques, as women are not allowed access to the mosque for religious reasons among the larger section of the Mappila community. However, both men and women participate in the *mawlud* held outside of the mosque—in households, public halls, etc., although both will be sexually segregated, again, in accord with the demands of proper Islamic conduct these Mappilas aspire to. For reasons of religiously-demanded sexual segregation, I have not been able to observe and document the dynamics of women's participation in *mawlud* and all of my data comes from attending and taking part in men's *mawlud*s, as it were, (many of which women would also join in an adjacent room/hall—which was inaccessible to me—when *mawlud*s are held off mosque).

A *mawlud* text begins with a certain prose narrative (better known by the Arabic word *hadith,* which technically refers to the tradition of the Prophet) followed by a corresponding poem (often called *bayt,* which means "verse" in Arabic)—the *mawlud* is in Arabic through and through. The number of prose narratives interspersed with poems differs from *mawlud* to *mawlud* and it is not uncommon to make an improvised *mawlud*—so to speak—by choosing parts of different *mawlud*s in the prayer manual. *Mawlud* recitation is antiphonal from start to finish. While the prose narratives in ornate, classical Arabic often describing vignettes concerning the birth and life of the Prophet are more often than not read out only by one of the *musliyar*s present or by others in the audience who are confident of their ability to read the Arabic texts aloud. This reading activity is frequently punctuated by the rest of the group invoking necessary and desirable utterances or expressions as demanded by the text that is read out—these include invoking blessings on the Prophets, companions of the Prophet, and other revered Muslim figures who are mentioned throughout the text. *Salat,* invoking blessings and greetings on the Prophet (*swallallahu 'alaihi wasallam*), is the most remarkable of the invocations that overwhelm a *mawlud* performance.

Once a prose narrative comes to a close, as indicated by the reader's modulation of voice while giving out the last word, the entire group fervently chants *salat* three times, thereby paving the way for the corresponding poem to be sung with much more fervour. Each poem that follows a prose narrative has a familiar refrain, usually called *jawab* (literally "answer") to it that all the attendees know by heart. The *jawab* is repeated after each line of the poem. While the attendees also follow the whole poem that is being sung under the *musliyar*s' supervision—of course, most of the attendees have committed to memory parts, and some even the whole, of *mawlud* poems through regular attendance at performances—it is through the *jawab* that the full participation of attendees is not only secured but also sustained effectively. Note that although Mappilas have basic familiarity with Arabic as the language is so crucial to them liturgically, their literacy in Arabic is largely about recognising the grapho-phonic correspondences, and so being capable of producing the right sounds, when reading the Quran, for example. Therefore, the *mawlud* text, completely in Arabic, does not make any semantic demands upon them. Though some of the attendees I talked to had some sense of what the familiar *jawab*s meant, the understanding of *mawlud* texts at the level of semantics for most of average attendees stops at a general feeling that they are extolling the virtues of the Prophet, that they are venerating the Prophet through the narratives being read out and the songs sung—although they have no clue of details in any concrete sense. More importantly however, there are numerous words, phrases, proper nouns permeating a *mawlud* text which induce immediate recognition from the attendees—names and attributes of the Prophet Muhammad, for instance—which in turn evokes appropriate response in the form of invocations and bodies forth attitudes and emotions appropriate for the passages/verses recited such as joy, reverence for the Prophet, longing for his resting place, etc. Thus, the reception of *mawlud*s by ordinary Mappilas does not reside as much in silent, privatised consumption of texts as in the kinesthetic responses that these texts engender such as appropriate invocations, body movements and gestures.[35]

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[34] Of course, I am talking about the bare minimums here: the materials used to add colour and vigour to the *mawlud* occasion vary from place to place, household to household. As for the number of attendees at the *mawlud,* it also differs across occasions, venues, etc. Of the *mawlud*s I have attended, the ones held in the Huda Masjid at Kizhisseri in the first twelve days of Rabi'ul Awwal had 40–50 attendees on an average. In the same mosque, the birthday of the Prophet drew more than one hundred participants to the early morning *mawlud* recitation. In households, I have attended *mawlud*s where the number of participants ranged from 10 to 20 to 30, and even more, depending on the size and scale of the ritual events.

The alternate reading and singing of *mawlud* narratives in prose and verse reaches its apogee when the *qiyam* (standing) is staged. The *mawlud* recitation typically ends with a final round of supplication led by the *musliyar* or imam (the leader of ritual prayers at the mosque) present—the formal prayer in Arabic at the end of each *mawlud* is always preferred, though it is not uncommon for the *musliyar*/imam to add to the formulaic prayer supplicatory utterances both in Arabic and Malayalam in order to appeal stronger to the attendees, depending on the context of the *mawlud* recitation.

Qiyam (or *nikkal*/*nilkkal* in Mappila parlance) refers to the practice of standing in honour of the Prophet towards the end of the *mawlud* recitation when the *Ashraqa Bayt* or what Mappilas simply calls *Ashraqa* (a *mawlud* ode called after its opening hemistich "*Ashraqa al-badru 'alayna*," which means "The full moon has descended on us!") is sung out. The *Ashraqa* song that immediately follows the prose narrative which colourfully depicts the much sought after birth of the Prophet figures in the *mawlud* of obscure authorship known as *Sharraf al-Anam* ("Honour of humankind"—drawn from its opening passage of rhymed prose that begins with "Praise be to Allah who *honoured humankind* with the bearer of the highest station") which enjoys broad circulation among Mappilas. The standard refrain or *jawab* to this "standing" ode is a set of profuse invocations on the Prophet, namely,

O Prophet, peace be unto you!
O Messenger, peace be unto you!
O Beloved, peace be unto you!
The blessings of Allah be upon you!

The bodily act of standing when the *mawlud* is approaching its crescendo brings to light the ritual enactment of emotions—love and gratitude for the Prophet, for instance—that is integral to the *mawlud* recitation as a technique of ethical formation for Mappilas. Talking to me about the *qiyam* over a dinner at the end of a *mawlud* we attended in a mutual friend's house, Akbar, a Mappila dentist in his thirties practising at Kondotty in Malappuram, noted that the act of standing in honour of the Prophet during the *mawlud* was "effective"—and this is his word as he frequently slipped many English words into our conversation in Malayalam—in that it actually gets us immersed (*layippikkunnu*) in the *mawlud* and produces (*undakkunnu*) in us the love of the Prophet that is required of all Muslims. I shall return to this point made by Akbar below.

The most popular of the *mawlud* texts among Mappilas, however, is the *Manqus Mawlud,* which Mappilas have traditionally attributed to a renowned Mappila '*alim* (religious scholar) of Yemeni Arab descent, Shaikh Zainuddin b. Ali al-Makhdum al-Malabari (d.1521), also called "the senior Makhdum". It was he who had presided over the heyday of the Shaikh Makhdum institution at Ponnani (a coastal town in Malappuram). As the tradition goes, Shaikh Zainuddin composed this *mawlud* when approached by people from Ponnani and its neighbourhoods who were fearful of deadly disease breaking out in their midst.[36] Accordingly, this work has been credited in Keralite Sunni Islam with curative, talismanic, and spiritual powers.[37] As the title of the *mawlud* suggests (which literally means *The Abridged*),[38] in his work Shaikh Zainuddin has offered a cross-section of popular *mawlid* narratives in the Arab-Islamic tradition. *Manqus* comprises of five odes tastefully interspersed with prose narratives—all of them never failing to recreate, with all pomp and show, the wonders, *inter alia,* preceding, accompanying and following the much sought-after birth of the Prophet Muhammad. A typical *mawlud* recitation among Mappilas, however, involves selections from both *Manqus* and *Sharrf al-Anam*—the latter is especially, though by no means exclusively, brought in in order to make use of its popular *Ashraqa Bayt* that literally has the attendees rise to their feet to perform the *qiyam*.[39] It should be noted that despite being part of the *mawlud Sharraf al-Anam*, the *Ashraqa Bayt* often figures as a single work in the Mappila prayer book for ready use.

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[35] Cf. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape.*

Both *Manqu*s and *Sharraf al-Anam,* like other *mawlud*s and devotional songs, circulate in prayer manuals/pamphlets which are synecdochically called *mawlud kitab* (book of *mawlud*) or *edu* (literally "leaf" or "page" of a book)—more interestingly, these prayer manuals are also known as *sabeena*s/*safeena*s, a word which I learnt from my mother at a very early age and then kept hearing often as I grew up in a village in South Malabar.[40] The word "*sabeena*" is a corruption of the Persian "*shabeena*" which means "nocturnal."[41] Since Mappilas used to (and continue to) recite *mawlud*s, *mala*s, and other devotional songs, and a variety of litanies from the prayer book daily at night, most especially between *maghrib* (sunset prayer) and *'isha'*(night prayer), the prayer book was also called *sabeena/safeena* metonymically, meaning "that which is recited at night".

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[36] Bahauddin Muhammad Nadwi, "Ishqinte Makhdumian Bhavangal" in *Pravachaka Prakirthanam* (Chemmad, 2006).

[37] My use of the word "Sunni" needs a qualification in keeping with its popular use in Keralite Islam: Sunni here exclusively refers to the majority of Mappila Muslims of Kerala who follow the Shafii school of Islamic law, often dubbed "traditionalists" by the "reformist" Salafi groups because of their participation in contentious Islamic practices such as the *mawlud* and saint veneration—the seemingly "polytheistic" practices from the Salafi point of view. Sunnis are the followers of the "traditionalist" ulama organisation Samastha Kerala Jam'iyyathul Ulama ("Samastha," for short) or its splinter groups. The foremost "reformist" Islamic group in Kerala is Kerala Nadwathul Mujahideen (K. N. M.) with its own breakaway factions, and its supporters are known as "Mujahids." On Islamic groups in Kerala, see Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*; Kutty, "The Mujahid Movement"; M. Abdul Samad, *Islam in Kerala: Groups and Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Kollam, 1998); and Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, "Islamism and Social Reform in Kerala, South India," *Modern Asian Studies* 42: 2/3 (2008), pp. 317–346. Throughout this essay, when I say "Mappilas" I am thinking of "Sunni Mappilas," unless otherwise stated, as it is to them that Mappila devotional genres such as the *mawlud* and the *mala* carry recitative and performative value geared to the programme of ethical formation.

[38] It has been argued by some Mappila researchers that the correct title of this popular *mawlud* is not *manqus,* meaning "abridged" or "shortened" but *mankus,* meaning "upside-down"— drawn from a reference in the *mawlud* to the miracle of all the idols on the earth falling upside down (*wa aswbahat aswnamu al-dunya kulluha mankusatan*) at the time of the Prophet's birth (Abdu Rahman Mangad, personal communication, dated 25 January 2013). I am less persuaded by this argument, not only because it rests on a laboured interpretation of the etymology of the *mawlud's* title with little evidence, internal or otherwise, to that effect but also because the interpretation dose not stand the test of Arabic grammar. For if the title referred to "the idols fallen upside-down," then the appropriate adjective to use would be the feminine "*mankusat*(*un*)," not the masculine "*mankus*(*un*)," because since *aswnam*, the plural form of the inanimate noun *swanam* (idol), is of the feminine gender, the adjective that qualifies it should also take the feminine form, according to standard Arabic grammar.

[39] While there are many other *mawlud* texts popular among Mappilas, including *Badr Mawlud* (in honour of the holy martyrs of the famous Battle of Badr in early Muslim history), I confine my analysis and ethnographic account to *Manqus* and *Sharrafa al-Anam*, the two most famous *mawlud* texts, that are often combined in performance at the *mawluds* I have attended. My own view is that focusing on *mawluds* where these two texts are recited— mostly in part—is sufficient to give us a fairly good sense of how the *mawlud* as a devotional genre plays a constitutive role in the self-fashioning of Mappilas.

In actual practice, the use of *mawlud* narratives in Malabar, as elsewhere in Muslim societies, extends well beyond the occasion of the Prophet's birthday, only an annual event, to the daily grind of life for devout Muslims. The *mawlud* performs a tremendous array of literary, thaumaturgical, liturgical, and religious functions for the Sunni Mappilas. They range from personal acts of piety and devotion to the Prophet, to its widespread public recitation, especially, in many areas other than the Prophet's birthday: at wakes, housewarmings, marriages, in fulfilment of vows, before the start of a new undertaking, and so forth. While it is also recited by Mappila Muslims individually for its meritorious and numinous value, in fulfilment of desires, etc. the *mawlud* is more commonly held collectively at households, mosques, and public venues. Indeed, most of the *mawlud*s I attended during my fieldwork in parts of Malappuram district in South Malabar were held in connection with housewarmings, wakes, and death anniversaries of family members, although the *mawlud*s which were performed in fulfilment of vows and simply to gain *barkat* (blessing) and earn merit were not uncommon.[42]

The Islamic month of Rabi'ul Awwal which witnessed the Prophet's birth, is the month of the *mawlud* par excellence in Malabar—in this month, especially throughout its first twelve days, the twelfth day being the birthday of the Prophet, recitations and chants of *mawlud* narratives literally submerge the devotional soundscape of Mappila villages and towns. Though household events are not rare during this month, the mosque becomes the privileged site for the *mawlud* throughout the first two weeks of the month. The recitations are usually held in the evening between the sunset and night prayers (*maghrib* and *'isha'*) or immediately after the night prayer (*'isha'*). This mosque-centered *mawlud* festivity culminates in a well-attended, recital of the *mawlud* on the early morning of the twelfth day of Rabi'ul Awwal to coincide with the time of the Prophet's birth which, according to the tradition in circulation among my informants, took place in the early hours nearing the break of dawn on a Monday—the hour that is just before the time of the obligatory dawn prayer (*subhi*). After a *mawlud* at the mosque, blessed sweets or pudding known as *chirni*—a corruption of the Persian word "*shirini*" literally "sweets"— is served. Usually sponsored by residents of a *mahallu*, (literally, "place," but in Mappila usage refers to a demarcated area of Muslim population of varying size under the jurisdiction of a local congregational mosque known as juma' *masjid/jama'at palli* with a *qadi*—Islamic scholar who advises Muslims on Islamic personal law— at its helm), *chirni* can be anything from snacks, bakery, dates to a meal. But the typical, much sought after, *chirni* for the mosque *mawlud* among the Mappilas I worked with is what they call *kava/kulavi,* which is traditional South Indian pudding or *payasam* that mainly includes cracked wheat, coconut and jaggery. Mappila families in a *mahallu* vie with each other to sponsor *kava* to be served at mosque *mawlud*s. Since most mosques usually hold *mawlud*s only for the first twelve days of Rabi'ul Awwal, only a few families get the chance to sponsor *kava*. In fact, as many of my informants have told me, they all contact people on the mosque board enquiring if they can offer *kava* to a mosque *mawlud* in Rabi'ul Awwal only to be told that all the spots are "booked."

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[40] In this essay I have referred to the texts of *Manqus* and *Sharraf al-Anam* as they appear in the *sabeena 151 Vaka Mawlid Kitab* (C. H. Ibrahim Kutty and Brothers, n. d).

[41] K. K. Muhammad Abdul Kareem, *Rasikashiromani Kunhayin Musliyarude Kappappattum Nulmadhum* (Tirur, 1983), pp. 29–31.

[42] There are popular *mawlud* occasions held at regular intervals in different parts of Malappuram district of northern Kerala. Examples are the weekly *mawlud* of Mundambra and the famous local *mawlud* (*nattu mawlud*) of Tanur. Mundambra is a village near Areacode town in Malappuram. The weekly *mawlud* here is held every Monday night at the local mosque and it involves the recitation of the *Manqus Mawlud*. It was reportedly started about a century ago at the behest of a local scholar who suggested the *mawlud* recitation as a cure when cholera broke out at Mundambra, leaving a trail of death over the area. Tanur is a coastal town in Malappuram. The annual local *mawlud* festival held here on Friday nights of the Islamic month of Rabi'ul Aqir, again, was started more than a century ago as a cure for cholera and plague that were raging through the locality. The Tanur local *mawlud* includes recitation of constellations of *mawlud* texts, including the *Manqus Mawlud, Muhyiddin Mawlud* (a *mawlud* in honour of the Sufi master Shaikh Muhyiddin Abdul Qadir al-Jilani), and *Rifaii Mawlud* (a *mawlud* venerating the Sufi leader Shaikh Ahmad al-Kabir al-Rifaii)—all circulating in the Mappila prayer book called *mawlud kitab/sabeena*. Cf. K. V. Abdulla Faizy, *Manqus Mawlid: Paribhasha-Vyakhyanam* (Kottkkal, 2008). On a personal note, I have participated in the local *mawlud* festival at Tanur once, although I did so more as a practitioner than as an ethnographer. However, my ethnographic data in this essay does not concern either the Mundambra *Mawlud* or the Tanur *Mawlud*. Nonetheless, I believe that field analysis of these popular *mawlud* gatherings will yield greater insight into the sociality of many contemporary Mappilas.

Key to devotional piety tied up with the *mawlud* is the concept of *baraka*–or *barkat* in Mappila Malayalam. An "auspicious power" that affects all that is associated with sacred Islamic persons such as the Prophet Muhammad and Sufis, and holy things such as a copy of the Quran or a prayer book, the concept of *baraka* is highly "amorphous" as it is communicated by "association", rather than elicited by "exchange" as is the case with the notion of *thawab* (merit or reward).[43] That is, unlike merit or *thawab* that accrues from pious actions one performs, *baraka* does not depend on the performance of actions as such since one can benefit from the *baraka* generated by others (for example, holy men). In actual practice, however, both *thawab* and *baraka* are mutually entangled, although they are by no means reducible to each other. This is best illuminated by the two phrases often used by the *mawlud* attendees I have interviewed. When asked why they are participating in *mawlud*s*,* they would reply with little variation: "*kooli kittanum*" (to earn *thawab*) and *barkatinum* (to gain *barkat*). Here, the attendee does benefit not only from the merit resulting from his pious acts of recitation of and participation in the *mawlud* but also from the *baraka* associated with the figure of the Prophet, the spatial and temporal specificities of the *mawlud,* and so on. *Barkat* permeates everything that is connected with the *mawlud*—space, time, text, food, etc. The *mawlud majlis* (venue), *mawlud* text, *sabeena*, and *chirni* all are understood to be embodiments and conduits of *barkat*. Consequently, the *mawlud* is not just about the recitation of the devotional text—since *barkat* is an all-pervasive force, *chirni,* a seemingly mundane thing, also assumes a central place in the overall performative complex of the *mawlud*. An important consequence of *barkat* for ethical cultivation as it is envisaged in the Mappila imaginary is that the auspicious power of the *mawlud* transforms one's daily conduct of life by cultivating in the practitioner the virtuous love for the Prophet which in turn helps her/him acquire *adab,* the proper Islamic conduct, and finally get closer to God—the ultimate end of ethical formation as the Mappilas see it. As Pokkar, a businessman based in Malappuram town, pointed out, “Thanks to the *barkat* of the revered (*mahanmar*), we become conscious of our evil ways and try to live our lives in fear of God, in worship of Him (*padachone pedichu, onu ‘ibadatheduthu*)”. Note that *barkat* here is tied to bodily acts such as reciting the *mawlud,* visiting mosques, Sufi shrines, and even eating *chirni* that accompany a devotional practice such as the *mawlud. Mawlud* generates *barkat* that has implications for the life of the attendees beyond the immediate spatial and temporal coordinates of the *mawlud*: it also influences how the attendees conduct their affairs on a day-to-day basis so that they remain aware of their ultimate obligation to live in accord with the will of God—that is, as a *true* Muslim or, in Pokkar’s words above, “in fear of God”.

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[43] Marion Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* (London, 2007), pp. 82–84.

Part of the *mawlud* festivity during Rabi‘ul Awwal also includes the *mawlud* procession taken out on the streets of villages and towns during which *mawlud* songs and other praise poems to the Prophet pour out of loudspeakers, and, more usually now, to the accompaniment of a traditional Mappila art form called *daffmuttu.*[44] The procession usually winds through the alleys, streets and thoroughfares of each *mahallu.* Yet another component of the *mawlud* festivity is a public *mawlud* meet or gathering, often called *nabidina sammelanam*, at each local mosque (or madrasa, traditional Islamic institution, attached to it) where young madrasa students give short Islamic sermons celebrating the life of the Prophet, among others, and sing a variety of praise songs in both Malayalam and Arabic—although sometimes poetry and oratory in other Indian languages such as Urdu are also featured in order to add colour and flavour to the occasion. This public event is greatly appreciated because in addition to its general meritorious aspects characteristic of the *mawlud,* it also serves as a platform where the youth of Mappila community cut their oratorical and artistic teeth in a strictly religious setting and environment. It also helps the community to re/orient and channel to Islamic ends the creative and artistic potentialities of its young generation who daily spend most of their time in secular liberal spaces such as public schools and universities which, as the Mappilas I worked with noted, render the task of *becoming* a pious Muslim extremely difficult. Kuttyamu, a trader by profession and a key organizer of Islamic activities at Kizhisseri, a town north of Malappuram district, with whom I have attended several *mawlud*s not only in Rabi‘ul Awwal but in other months as well, commented to me about public *mawlud* meetings thus: “We live in such an age where it is very hard to live a “proper” (*sharikkum*) Muslim life so it is important to hold events of this sort (*mawlud*) so that we and, especially, our children can try to keep to the demands of what it means to be a Muslim”. Note that in the religious imaginary of Mappilas like Kuttyamu *mawlud*’s theological/juridical authenticity is not the moot point—he instead sees the *mawlud* festivity and a variety of practices that go into it as constitutive of becoming a good Muslim. Key to this imaginary are the virtues of love, joy and reverence for the Prophet which are understood to be nothing more than an article of faith that serves both as a means and an end.

Commensality, the activity of eating together, and distribution of food are another feature of the *mawlud* festivity among Mappilas. Serving food is a defining component of the

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[44] *Daffmuttu* is a popular Mappila art form in which the performers beat *daffu (also daf)*, a type of frame drum, and make set movements to the tune of accompanying songs which extol the virtues of the Prophet and other religiously important figures such as the Prophet’s companions and Sufis.

Mappila *mawlud*—whether held in households or mosques. On the birthday of the Prophet, or on a day immediately after it, each Mappila *mahallu* celebrating the *mawlud* organises *annadanam* (distribution of food) on a grand scale. This "blessed" food, again, is believed to be a carrier of *barkat* and, regardless of their social status, Mappilas—young and old, men and women alike—throng the mosque or madrasa premises to collect food and take it home. In households, a *mawlud* usually begins with refreshments and snacks, and a sumptuous feast awaits the end of the recitation. Even the poor Mappilas do not do things by halves when it comes to serving food at the *mawlud* in their homes—in some of the *mawlud*s I attended which were held in the homes of Mappilas who were all low-income wage earners, the menu was no less inviting and abundant than that I found in the *mawlud* feasts thrown by affluent Mappila families. While extravagance, and ostentatious display of wealth and status in one's daily conduct of life are often decried by many of these Mappilas, feasting at the *mawlud* as best as one could is considered a virtuous act that accrues divine rewards. Saidali Baqavi, who serves as an *imam* and *qadi* at the Kizhisseri *mahallu* where Kuttyamu whom I mention above lives, reiterated to the residents of his *mahallu* the rationale behind *mawlud* feasting and the whole idea of the *mawlud* celebrations during one of his weekly lessons I attended which was also open to women. Not surprisingly, his Malayalam prose was lavishly interspersed with Arabic words and expressions. I quote him:

> First of all, it is all about *it'amu al-ta'am* (serving food) which is in and of itself an *'amal swalih* (virtuous deed) as the Prophet had said when once asked about the best of deeds that a Muslim could do. Second—and note this very carefully (*valare shradhichu kelkkanam*)—we are feasting at the *mawlud* also because we need to love *Muthu Nabi* (the beloved Prophet)—you know, we can't accomplish our *iman* (faith) if we don't truly love him more than anything else in this world—and this is a hadith. Also, hasn't Allah said in the Quran: "The Prophet is more deserving of—and closer to—the *mu'minin* (the faithful) than their own selves?" Now, you might ask: What does it mean to love Muthu Nabi? In short, it involves following in his footsteps (*avarude patha pintudaruka*). It also involves rejoicing over his birth without which Allah would not have created this world! So we owe everything to Muthu Nabi whose *nur* (light) Allah created before he created everything else. Listen, I am not cooking up all these stories (*njan ithu veruthe parayukayalla*). These are all found in *kitab*s (authoritative religious books). Even *mawlud*s teach us these things. How does *Manqus Mawlud* begin? It begins with "Exalted be Allah who brought out in the month of Rabi'ul Awwal the moon that is the Prophet of guidance, created the Prophet's light before He created the world and named him Muhammad!" You see, exuding joy over the Prophet's birth is also part of loving him. Thus, when we serve food at the *mawlud,* it is doubly virtuous, as it were: we serve food, which is in itself part of the Sunna (tradition) of Muthu Nabi, but we also do so on account of our love for Nabi Tangal (the Prophet). We know that we don't feel true love for him at first but if we continue to recite the *mawlud* and participate in *mawlud* feasts, and say *salat* (invocations on the Prophet), we will gradually cultivate love for Nabi Tangal, which, if developed fully, will guide us through our daily life and then, you know, we won't go astray. That love will keep us to the *sunna* of Nabi Tangal. Nothing associated with the *mawlud* is in vain, nothing! No matter how trivial it might look to our eyes. Inviting people to the *mawlud,* assisting in making arrangements for the *mawlud* in mosques and elsewhere, amassing monetary and other resources for the *mawlud* celebrations in *mahallu*s, preparing the *mawlud* feast—anything and everything connected with the *mawlud* is important and meritorious, and earns the doer the *riza* (pleasure) of both Allah and his Messenger.

I have allowed Baqavi to speak at some length for himself and the Mappilas whom he serves so that we can learn from Mappilas themselves about the heart of the programme of self-cultivation made possible by the *mawlud* in all its constitutive facets—from the recitation of the *mawlud* text to the serving of food at the end. Baqavi calls attention to the key emotions appropriate to the devotional practice of the *mawlud*: love and reverence for the Prophet and joy at his much sought after birth. Indeed, *mawlud* texts are not lacking in references to these emotions underlying the celebration of the *mawlud*. For example, in *Manqus* there are references to the *mawlid* being celebrated in expression of joy at the Prophet's birth (*farahan bi mawlidi rasulillahi*). The evocation and expression of appropriate emotions that Baqavi places at the centre of the Mappila *mawlud* resonate with the practice of the *mawlid* celebration in the larger Islamic world. In this tradition, sentiments such as joy and love are treated as concrete matters to be regulated under the Islamic law (*shari'a*) which in turn are subject to divine reward and punishment. Accordingly, evoking and manifesting joy and delight at the birth of the Prophet is considered by the *mawlud* practitioners to be a religious act which is no less obligatory. Similarly, love of the Prophet is also deemed to be an obligation on the part of Muslims and there are authoritative hadiths to this effect, including the one alluded to in the excerpt from Baqavi's lesson—i.e., a true believer ought to love the Prophet more dearly than "his parents, his children, and the whole humankind" (*min validihi va valadihi va al-nasi ajma'in*).[45] Moreover, there is an impressive body of Islamic literature that thematises the emotions such as joy and love that are appropriate to the *mawlid* celebration, and as this is available elsewhere, I do not wish to rehearse it here.[46] What is remarkable, however, is that since the necessary emotions such as joy, love, reverence, and gratitude are impalpable in and of themselves, they must find expression in outward activities. To rejoice, to love, to revere, and to be grateful—they are all not mere subjective feelings but performative acts as well. Therefore, these emotions manifest themselves in a variety of external acts such as recitation, singing, standing, taking out processions, decorating, feasting, etc. It is to these performative conventions whereby joy and delight, love and reverence for the Prophet are acted out in publicly recognised forms that Baqavi draws our attention to when he talks about feeding people, reciting the *mawlud,* organising the *mawlud* celebrations, and so on. Since most Mappilas do not understand Arabic, the role of imams/*qadi*s, like Baqavi, in inculcating among Mappilas the devotional model underpinning the *mawlud* is paramount. Each *mahallu* organises a host of Islamic lessons, usually known to Mappilas as "*mata padhana/Quran classukal*" ("religious/Quran classes"), on a regular basis that are aimed at educating ordinary Mappilas about a wide range of topics, including the *mawlud* and saint veneration. The lesson delivered by Baqavi from which I have just quoted is a case in point.

Two points are analytically consequential in the passage extracted from Baqavi's lesson that help us appreciate the ethical work that the *mawlud* enacts in crafting the Mappila self. First, the understanding of the *mawlud* in Baqavi's framework views the *mawlud* not as merely expressive, but also constitutive, of the virtues of the love and reverence for the Prophet—and similar appropriate dispositions such joy and gratitude— which, on this understanding, are thought to be an article of faith incumbent upon all Muslims. That is to say, *mawlud* attendees do not enter into the *mawlud* with an *always already* set of emotions and dispositions appropriate to the performance of the *mawlud* such as the love and reverence for the Prophet. Instead, it is also through the *mawlud* and related practices such as invocation of *salat* that they develop such virtuous emotions and affects. Second, on this understanding, the *mawlud* is construed as both a means and an end and there is no necessary separation between the two.[47] It is an end because the virtue of love for the Prophet underpinning the celebration of the *mawlud* is considered by Mappilas like Baqavi to be an obligation on the part of the believers—something that is necessary to accomplish their faith (*iman*). The *mawlud* and the virtuous love one cultivates through it are also a means in that they also inform the way one conducts oneself daily in life, thereby they help one realise the larger goal of being a pious Muslim who is closer to God—of being a *muttaqwi* (roughly "God-fearing"). Notably, in this framing, the performance of the *mawlud* by bodying forth appropriate emotions and gestures is a *necessary*, and not a *contingent*, act in the acquisition of both the virtuous love for the Prophet and piety in general.[48]

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[45] Muhammad al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 1, (tr.) Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Lahore 1983), p. 20.

[46] For a useful summary, see Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*.

Conclusion

In the last analysis, by focusing in this essay on the constitutive role of the *mawlud* narratives in the crafting of a Mappila ethical self, I have sought to provide a refreshingly productive approach to the study of devotional performance genres that are part and parcel of Mappila literary culture. This approach is characterised by a profound sensitivity to the social production of Mappila devotional narratives that have tremendous bearing on the making of a Sunni Mappila in Keralite Islam. In doing so, I have explicitly written and argued *against* the dominant paradigm of analysing Mappila literary culture through a "histological" lens that objectifies literary texts as stylistic wonders with little or no bearing on how men and women conduct their affairs in life. This essay, however, does not aim to impugn the aesthetic qualities of Mappila literary culture. In fact, the essay is an attempt to grasp the mutual imbrication and entanglement of the aesthetic and the performative in Mappila literary culture—a culture that *makes* Mappilas who they are while also *being made* by them.

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[47] *Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.*

[48] *Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India* on the *mala* genre in Mappila literary culture. I cannot, however, explore this topic here for want of space. See my discussion of the *mala* genre in Muneer Aram Kuzhiyan, *Poetics of Piety: Genre, Devotion, and Self-Fashioning in the Mappila Literary Culture of South India* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, 2015).