
Polyglossic Malabar: Arabi-Malayalam and the Muhiyuddinmala in the age of transition (1600s–1750s)



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Abstract

This article examines the relations between trade, faith, and textual traditions in early modern Indian Ocean region and the birth of Arabi-Malayalam, a new system of writing which has facilitated the growth of a vernacular Islamic textual tradition in Malabar since the seventeenth century. As a transliterated scriptorial-literary tradition, Arabi-Malayalam emerged out of the polyglossic lingual sphere of the Malabar Coast, and remains as one of the important legacies of social and religious interactions in pre-colonial south Asia. The first part of this article examines the social, epistemic and normative reasons that led to the scriptorial birth of Arabi-Malayalam, moving beyond a handful of Malayalam writings that locate its origin in the social and economic necessities of Arab traders in the early centuries of Islam. The second part looks at the complex relationship between Muslim scribes and their vernacular audience in the aftermath of Portuguese violence and destruction of Calicut—one of the largest Indian Ocean ports before the sixteenth century. This part focuses on Qadi Muhammed bin Abdul Aziz and his Muhiyuddinmala, the first identifiable text in Arabi-Malayalam, examining how the Muhiyuddinmala represents a transition from classical Arabic theological episteme to the vernacular-popular poetic discourse which changed the pietistic behaviour of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar.

This article proposes that the transregional and trans-local mobility of Malabar trading communities in the Indian Ocean region facilitated a complex range of translingual reciprocities that finally resulted in the emergence of what is generally known as Arabi-Malayalam literature.¹ Arabi-Malayalam evolved as a major lingual-scriptorial form of Islamic pietistic

¹There are a few Malayalam works on Arabi-Malayalam but these mostly focus on its etymological and lexicological aspects, overlooking the complex ideational and historical processes that led to its growth as a lingual-scriptorial variant: see O. Abu, *Arabi-Malayala Sahitya Charitram* (Kottayam, 1970); C. N. Ahmad Moulavi and K. K. Mohammad Abdul Kareem, *Mahattaya Mappila Sahitya Paramparyam* (Calicut, 1978); and P. K. Muhammad Kunhi, *Muslimkalum Kerala Samskaravum* (Thrissur, 1982). In a recent work, M. H. Ilias and Shamsad Hussain have attempted to analyse the morphological and phonological characteristics of Arabi-Malayalam script. However, larger questions about the historical origin of this script and important narrative shifts that happened in the *Muhiyuddinmala* remained outside the purview of their study, see *Arabi-Malayalam: Linguistic and Cultural Traditions of Mappila Muslims of Kerala* (New Delhi, 2017).

communications and intellectual designs from the seventeenth century, and eventually became the *lingua sacra* of the Mappilas, that is the vernacular Muslims of Malabar. Arabi-Malayalam's scriptorial, literary and textual developments were the result of a long history of polyglossic engagements in the coastal Malabar region that shared extensive maritime relations with various ports in the Indian Ocean littoral and beyond. Indeed, Malabar's relations with different lingual spaces in Indian Ocean trade networks influenced its growth as a polyglossic region where people used a significant number of loan words and multiple scripts.²

Emerging out of this polyglossic space, the Arabi-Malayalam literary tradition subsequently elevated Mappilas to a higher degree of social confidence from the seventeenth century, and today it remains a major legacy of the interactions between different lingual communities in the polyglossic trade networks of the Indian Ocean region. Accordingly, this article investigates the possibilities that historians and linguistic scholars have opened up in the process examining the complicated social-lingual fields of pre-colonial Indian Ocean regions, where numerous transliterated scriptorial systems such as Arabi-Malayalam and Arabi-Tamil were able to evolve.³

With the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean region, Malabar began in the late-sixteenth century to experience the rural migration of Mappilas as a considerable section of them withdrew from coastal regions like Calicut. Beginning in the early-seventeenth century, Arabi-Malayalam texts played a part in strengthening the evolution of Islamic micro-ritual spaces in the new agrarian hinterlands.⁴ These texts and their oral transmission proved decisive in shaping a number of what we might term as 'Mappila habitus' across the region. A range of collective ritual conventions and performances propagated by these texts in practice helped to determine how vernacular Muslims in Malabar conceived their cultural practices and social order in their new surroundings.⁵ The existence of numerous Arabi-Malayalam pietistic texts and lithographic printing presses in the nineteenth century shows how Arabi-Malayalam as a lingual-scriptorial form helped the Mappilas hold together as a community of believers in Malabar. Most of these texts were designed for collective recitation and performance so as to create a liturgical selfhood for vernacular Muslims in the agrarian hinterland of Malabar under British colonial rule.

The following discussion, therefore, explores a range of social and lingual factors that influenced the emergence of the Arabi-Malayalam script and the large corpus of literature that was subsequently produced in pre-colonial Malabar. The first section examines how the polyglossic lingual and scriptorial structures in pre-colonial urban Malabar shaped the trajectory of the Arabi-Malayalam script, while the second looks at the scribal acts of Qadi Muhammed (d. 1616), who authored the first identifiable Arabi-Malayalam text,

²Elizabeth Lambourn, "Borrowed Words in an Ocean of Objects Geniza Sources and New Cultural Histories of the Indian Ocean", in *Irreverent History: Essays for M.G.S. Narayanan*, (eds.) Kesavan Veluthat and Donald R. Davis Jr (New Delhi, 2014), pp. 363–414.

³See Torsten Tschacher, *Islam in Tamilnadu* (Halle, 2001); Istvan Perczel, "Garshuni Malayalam: A Witness to an Early Stage of Indian Christian Literature", *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 17, 2 (2014), pp. 263–323; Ophira Gamliel, "Jewish Malayalam", *International Journal of Dravidian Linguistics* 38, 1 (2009), pp. 147–175.

⁴P. K. Yasser Arafath, "Malappattukal: Charitram, Rashtreeyam Pradhirotham", *Bodhanam Quarterly Journal* 15, 13 (2014), pp. 67–91.

⁵For human practices and social ordering in such habitus, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 35–41.

the *Muhyuddinmala*. Written in 1607, this text created a new literary-liturgical culture in seventeenth-century Malabar, centred on the life of Abdul Qadir al-Jilani, the twelfth-century Sufi scholar-preacher of Bagdad whose stories influenced Muslims across the Indian Ocean world, from Africa to southeast Asia.⁶

Muslim scribal scholars proceeded to emulate the style and form of the *Muhyuddinmala* since the mid-1700s, a time that witnessed new political, material and cultural changes taking place in Malabar. For example the textual, pietistic and liturgical influences of the *Muhyuddinmala* can be clearly seen in the *Nool Madh*, an eighteenth-century composition that is believed to be the second Arabi-Malayalam text produced in the region. Writing in 1737, its author Kunjayin Musliyar versified the life and miracles of the Prophet Muhammed by closely following the litanical format and lyrical designs introduced by Qadi Muhammed in the *Muhyuddinmala*.⁷ However, in the early 1750s, Kunjayin Musliyar advanced a new style in Arabi-Malayalam versification in order to engage directly with the altered material and social realities of rural Muslims in Malabar. His *Kappappattu* (ship song), probably written in 1751, moved on from the sufi-prophetic panegyric model of earlier texts and portrayed *kappal* (ship) as a metaphor of detachment, delusion, economic instability and piety.⁸ *Kappappattu*'s allegorical descriptions—equating the ship with suffering, vulnerabilities, emotional shifts and bodily pain—presented a gloomy picture of Indian Ocean trade activities, the main economic stay of the Mappilas before they evolved into a major agrestic community in eighteenth-century Malabar. Accordingly, guided by recent historical scholarship, this article considers the potential of textual analysis as a method of history writing and how far that the *Muhyuddinmala* reflected Muslim scribal sensibilities and authorial anxieties during a troubled period in the Malabar region from the early-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century.⁹

The long history of these kinds of performative poetic texts broadly indicates that religious communities across the world have often chosen to focus on the life events of holy figures in order to bolster their social and moral existence in the face of various external and internal threats.¹⁰ In Malabar, this 'external threat' was the Portuguese, and, as a result, Muslim ulema, including Qadi Muhammed, categorised the sixteenth century as the age of *fasad* (disorder) after experiencing large-scale violence, social tensions and moral disturbance

⁶Martin van Bruinessen, "Shaykh `Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani and the Qadiriyya in Indonesia", *Journal of the History of Sufism* 1, 2 (2000), pp. 361–395; Hamza Malik, *The Grey Falcon: The Life and Teaching of Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani* (Leiden, 2018); Philip Ciantar, *The Ma'luf in Contemporary Libya: An Arab Andalusian Musical Tradition* (Oxon, 2016), p. 32.

⁷Kunjayin Musliyar, *Ithakunnathu Noolmadhu Enna Malayayirikkum*, (ed.) Kunji Moosa (Telicherry, 1875), British Library Collection, Uncatalogued Texts, Asia-Africa Room, pp. 1–12. This extant text has been considered as the earliest vernacular versification of the Prophet Muhammed in the region, see P. Sakkeer Hussian, *Kunjayin Musliyarude Noolmadh* (Kondotty, 2018), pp. 35–38; V. P. Muhammed Ali, *Mappilappattukal Noottandukaliloode* (Calicut, 2007), pp. 148–149.

⁸Kunjayin Musliyar, *Ithakunnathu Kappappattayirikkum*, (ed.) N. Abdu (Telicherry, 1883), British Library Collection, Uncatalogued Texts, Asia-Africa Room, pp. 1–8.

⁹See Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam in India, c. 1200–1800* (Delhi, 2004); Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee, *History in the Vernacular* (Delhi, 2008); Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973); Pankaj Jha, *A Political History of Literature: Vidyapati and the Fifteenth Century* (New Delhi, 2019); David L. Curley, *Poetry and History: Bengali Mangal-Kabya and Social Change in Pre-colonial Bengal* (Delhi, 2008).

¹⁰Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 26–27.

throughout the coastal littoral.¹¹ His own Arabic texts in this context undertook detailed discussions on jurisprudence, martyrdom, resistance and the importance of having an Islamic masculine kinship within the *shafite* juridical framework. But in the changed situation of post-Portuguese seventeenth-century Malabar, Qadi Muhammed expanded these discourses, focusing in the *Muhyiddinmala* on the possibilities of a performative liturgical Islam in the vernacular peculiarities of Arabi-Malayalam script. Subsequently, this text set the agenda for Muslim vernacular expressions, pietistic sensibilities and moral behaviour in the region with its representative verses with multi-layered meanings. Drawing on Foucault's thoughts regarding the "experience of language" and "order of significations", this article argues that the *Muhyiddinmala* represents a shift in both discursive behaviour and pietistic priorities among vernacular Muslims of Malabar in the seventeenth century.¹²

Pearls Meet Corals: Birth of a New Script

The emergence of the Arabi-Malayalam script has been traced by some scholars to the early centuries of Islam. O. Abu, writing in 1970, located its origin as far back as the ninth century: according to him, early Arab-Muslim missionaries in Malabar invented the script as they were forced to write in the local language (Malayalam), as they did elsewhere.¹³ Taking Abu's presumption to be an unquestionable historical fact, later scholars like C. A. Ahmad Moulavi overlooked the merit of examining what may have been the necessary conditions for such a transliterative script developing in multi-lingual South Asia.¹⁴ The resulting absence of serious historiographical engagement strengthened the belief that the Arabi-Malayalam script emerged out of deliberate and persuasive attempts by Arab Muslims to overcome the problems of intimate interaction with local Muslims, leaving many questions totally unresolved.¹⁵

Therefore, the central question asked in this first section is did early Arabic-speaking Muslims consider the invention of a transliterative script as necessary for communicating with a predominantly 'oral-literate' native coastal community that conducted its trade through commodity exchanges.¹⁶ The argument that 'it was being deliberate' presumes that not only did a substantial number of non-settled Arab Muslims have deep knowledge

¹¹The *ulema* of Malabar considered the sixteenth century as a period of *fasad* (disorder) for the excessive violence and destructions that the Portuguese caused, see P. K. Yasser Arafath, "Malabar Ulema in the Shafite Cosmopolis: Fitna, Piety and Resistance in the Age of Fasad", *The Medieval History Journal* 21, 1 (2018), pp. 25–68.

¹²Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London, 2002), pp. 46–48.

¹³Abu, *Arabi-Malayalam*, pp. 15–16.

¹⁴Moulavi and Kareem, *Mahattaya Mappila*, pp. 35–37.

¹⁵Kunhi, *Muslimkalum*, p. 209.

¹⁶Since the writing and reading largely remained the prerogatives of Muslim scholars and upper caste Hindus in pre-modern Malabar, most of the texts and other pieces of literature were circulated by word of mouth. Muslim scholar-scribes like Qadi Muhammed took this factor into consideration while composing religious texts for wider consumption. In this case, Qadi Muhammed was aware of the fact that scribal elites and scholars who wrote prose texts, dealing with subjects such as jurisprudence and resistance, used a range of hortatory methods such as ritualistic speeches and sermons. Like many vernacular communities in South India, the majority of Mappila Muslims in Malabar circulated their religious texts through the acts of memorisations, recitation and performances until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This article, thus, defines 'oral-literate' as a category which experienced the interplay of poetics, performance, recitation and memorisation before the *Arabi-Malayalam* printing press emerged in Malabar in the late-nineteenth century. The 'oral literate' subjectivity of the Mappilas became more complex in the late-nineteenth century when a significant number of them learned writing and reading and began investing in print as well.

of the local language but also that a significant number of local Muslims learned Arabic in the early years of Islam. An array of pre-colonial registers reflecting on the mercantile, religious and lingual sphere of coastal Malabar, however, points to problems inherent in such presumptions. While we do not have evidence to show the presence of a large native Muslim population in Malabar during the early years of Islam, new studies show that Arabic-speaking Muslims predominantly operated as peripatetic traders for centuries in the Indian Ocean region.¹⁷ Therefore, from available information, we learn that the evolution of Arabi-Malayalam—both script and texts—has to be placed in a different location in which a range of linguistic, communicative, scriptorial and historical engagements shaped the scribal sensibilities around politics, religion and everyday life in pre-colonial Malabar.

The lengthy account of Ludovico di Varthema, an early sixteenth-century Italian traveller who maintained close relations with Arab traders in Malabar, indicates that Arabic speakers in Indian Ocean port towns seldom spoke or wrote native languages until the late sixteenth century.¹⁸ Pre-colonial sources from other parts of the Indian Ocean and beyond suggest instead that they were no different from early Muslim missionaries from Arabia who did not make any active scriptorial innovation anywhere in the world. As a considerable fear existed amongst them about diluting the divinity of Arabic—both language and script—they took all possible precautions to avoid even minute scriptorial and lingual ‘corruption’ at least until the late-fourteenth century. Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), one of the major fourteenth-century Islamic philosophers and a scholar of language, was vocal about such *ulemiite* (scholastic) anxieties in the Maghrib region of northwest Africa. After witnessing the ‘corruption’ of the Arabic language in urban Maghrib, he unequivocally attributed the reasons for this to the lingual desires of non-Arabic speaking people who emerged as decisive players in economic and cultural activities in many parts of the pre-colonial Islamicate world.¹⁹ Recognising the differences in spoken and written forms of Arabic among various newly-settled communities in the Maghrib and beyond, Khaldun held their newly attained ‘state of sedentary’ responsible for scriptorial innovations and lingual ‘corruptions’. According to him, native Islamic communities in new sedentary states always tended to devise novel communicative methods through linguistic and scriptorial re-arrangements so as to survive in their new material and political locations.²⁰

Things remained unchanged in the fifteenth century as well. According to Agius, Arabic-speaking Muslim traders, scholars and laity continued to express deep concerns about such scriptorial and lingual transgressions across the Indian Ocean regions.²¹ Thus, taking its cues from two factors—the long history of Arab-traders’ peripatetic life, on the one hand, and slow developments in the sedentarisation of local Muslims in pre-colonial Malabar on the other—this article proposes that the Arabi-Malayalam script has a much shorter history than many scholars have previously suggested. It was only after oceanic life became more

¹⁷For a detailed description of peripatetic traders in Malabar, see Sebastian R. Pranje, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 89.

¹⁸Ludovico di Varthema, *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema in Egypt, Syria, Arabia Deserta and Arabia Felix, in Persia, India, and Ethiopia, AD 1503 to 1508*, translated by John Winter Jones (London, 1863), p. 145.

¹⁹Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, translated by Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, 2005), p. 312.

²⁰Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, p. 81.

²¹Dionisius A. Agius, *Classic Ships of Islam: From Mesopotamia to the Indian Ocean* (Leiden, 2008), p. 378.

complex and Arabic language structures became more flexible due to political, social and moral reconfigurations that native Muslims evolved as a stable sedentary population in Malabar, and the script emerged.

Moreover, this raises the one question that scholars of Arab–Malayalam have never posed: if Arabi–Malayalam had evolved as a stable and fully fledged script before the sixteenth century, how could its existence have escaped the notice of a range of reconnoitering Muslim travellers who visited Malabar from across the medieval world? For instance, Ibn Battuta—who recorded in detail a number of urban Muslim settlements, educational systems, Islamic scholars and their intellectual making across Malabar in the fourteenth century—made no reference to it. Similarly, Abdur Razzaq, the mid–fifteenth-century visitor, who promised his readers that he would provide them with all relevant matters worthy of mention, was no different.²²

Another sign of Arabi–Malayalam script’s non-existence before the sixteenth century is the complete absence of manuscripts, documents, inscriptions and oral memory written or preserved in any part of South Asia, though the region was already witnessing an increase in the number of sedentary Mappilas in its interior as well as in ports towns like Kannur. However, there is no material or oral evidence of any stable scriptorial innovation emerging from these changing lifestyles until the late–sixteenth century, that is precisely the time when the Mappilas moved to land-locked remote regions like Nadapuram in North Malabar in the wake of Portuguese violence.²³ Indeed, a recent study by Alam and Subrahmanyam indicates how the Mappilas identified migration as a natural response to Portuguese aggression in sixteenth-century Malabar’s coastal regions.²⁴

Thus, following Freeman’s arguments about the literary formation of Malayalam *bhasha*-region’s local language in pre-colonial times, it can be argued that the emergence of the Arabi–Malayalam script took place and was influenced by the specificities of the urban social field in coastal Malabar.²⁵ Hence, Arabi–Malayalam as a stable and complete scriptorial form that only emerged in the late–sixteenth century, with a circulation that was limited to a small section of scribal elites and urban residents there before the ‘age of transition’ (corresponding the period between *circa* 1600 and 1750s). Emerging from the lingual basis of the polyglossic Malayalam in port town localities, Arabi–Malayalam emerged from a local scriptorial exigency in agrarianate Malabar during the age of *fasad*, which witnessed a surge of *futhiya Islam* (new Muslims) as Qadi Muhammed identified them in the *Muhyuddinmala*.²⁶ The

²²H. A. R. Gibb and C. F. Beckingham, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, AD 1325–1354*, iv (London, 2017); for Abdur Razzaq, see Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 58.

²³Zainuddin Makhdum II, *Tuhfat-al Mujahideen fi ba’d Akhbar al-Burtughaliyan*, translated by C. Hamsa (Calicut, 1999).

²⁴Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Letters from Kannur, 1500–50, A Little Explored Aspect of Kerala History”, in *Clio and Her Descendants*, (ed.) Manu Devadevan (New Delhi, 2018), pp. 99–131.

²⁵Rich Freeman, “Rubies and Coral: The Lapidary Crafting of Language in Kerala”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, 1 (1998), pp. 38–39.

²⁶*Muhyuddinmala*, p. 12; *futhiya* can be transcribed as *puthiya* (new), as it has been used today. But I retain many such expressions in the article as they were used in the *Muhyuddinmala* so as to indicate how the Malabar *ulama* used Malayalam words during the period under scrutiny. I have used one of the earliest copies of the *Muhyuddinmala*, printed in 1876 by M. Koyali Haji at Telicherry. This copy is preserved in the un-catalogued manuscript section at the Asian and African Studies Reading Room, British Library. According to Koyali Haji, this lithographed version is a direct copy of the original manuscript which was preserved by the family of Qadi Muhammed. I

futhiya Islam were familiar with the polyglossic urban Malayalam which arose out of a “polyglot soundscape”, as Lambourn has characterised pre-colonial Indian Ocean ports.²⁷ The *Tharisappalli Copper Plate*, a mid-ninth-century inscription, is likely the earliest visual and textual evidence of the polyglossic ports in pre-colonial Kerala. This polyglossic inscription not only contains a range of languages, including Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Tamil and Malayalam, but also different scriptorial systems such as Pahlavi, Kufic and *Vattezhuthu*, indicating the multiple lingual backgrounds of urban elites.²⁸

The repeated movement of scholars, traders and refugees belonging to a range of lingual and scriptorial environments was the primary reason for Malabar’s polyglossic development. Malabar in pre-colonial times provided such groups with space to live a peaceful life, pursuing their respective social practices, ritual observances and sexual norms.²⁹ In Ibn Battuta’s words, Malabar housed a variety of lingual-scriptorial groups that spoke a diversity of languages that included Persian, Arabic, Chinese, Malayalam and Sanskrit.³⁰ Equally, various social and professional groups—such as interlocutors, brokers, scholars, travellers, scribes, students, soldiers, pilgrims and artisans, along with fugitives and slaves, who converged across the region’s coastal roads, towns and halting places—shaped the polyglossic character of the Malabar littoral.³¹ Lambourn, for instance, points out how this multi-lingual atmosphere led Ibn Battuta to use expressions like *talam* (dish/tray) in his brief descriptions about particular dietary behaviours in Indian Ocean ports.³² *Qissat Shakarwati Farnad*, an Arabic text probably written by a native scholar by the mid-sixteenth century, also reflected such influences. In order to create a relatable lingual effect on his readers, the anonymous writer of this text used *Shakarwati*, an Arabised expression for the Sanskrit word *Chakravartin*, instead of any Arabic expression denoting ‘emperor’ or ‘sovereign’. This word was used to eulogise Cherman Perumal, the ruler of Malabar who is believed to have embraced Islam in the presence of the Prophet Muhammed and performed the Hajj.³³

Being the most important port town in the Indian Ocean mercantile grid before the age of *fasad*, it was not surprising that Calicut attracted the largest number of polyglossic speakers. Varthema, who visited Malabar in the first decade of the sixteenth century, provides us with substantial information regarding the linguistic pluralism present in pre-colonial Calicut.³⁴ Supporting earlier information from Ibn Battuta, Varthema noted the presence of a variety

compared this version with a number of other printed versions that are found at the British Library and were printed in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. They include *Muhyiddinmala* (Telicherry, 1874), *Muhyiddinmala* (Telicherry, 1875), and *Muhyiddinmala* (Ponnani, 1909). All translations from this text are mine, unless otherwise mentioned.

²⁷Lambourn, *Borrowed Words*, p. 1.

²⁸M. R. Raghava Varier and Kesavan Veluthat, *Tharisappalli Pattayam* (Kottayam, 2013), pp. 94–99; Ophira Gamliel, “Back from Shingly: Revisiting the Premodern History of Jews in Kerala”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 55, 1 (2018), pp. 53–76.

²⁹Yohanan Friedman, “Qissat Shakarwati Farnad: A Tradition Concerning the Introduction of Islam to Malabar”, *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975), pp. 233–258.

³⁰Ibn Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Batuta with Notes and Illustration by Samuel Lee* (London, 1829), pp. 169–172 (hereafter *The Travels of Ibn Batuta*).

³¹Gibb and Beckingham, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, pp. 68–73.

³²Lambourn, *Borrowed Words*, pp. 7–8.

³³Friedman, *Shakarwati Farnad*, p. 245.

³⁴Varthema, *Travels*, p. 151.

of lingual-scriptorial communities that spoke Arabic, Mandarin, Spanish, Swahili, Persian and Malaya.³⁵ The polyglossic canvas of the city was also strengthened by native traders who spoke Tamil, Konkani, Gujarati, Bengali and Telugu.³⁶ Similarly, Barbosa details traders who spoke Persian, Gujarati and Deccani, in addition to highlighting Malabar's relations with other lingual regions such as Turkey, Cairo and Alexandria.³⁷ Thus, multiple interactions between a number of diverse lingual/scriptorial/scribal communities had shaped Malabar as a pre-modern polyglossic super power by the early-sixteenth century, much before colonial metropolises such as Kolkata and Madras emerged as 'polyglot cities' in the eighteenth century.³⁸ Its evolution as a polyglossic centre was the result of Malabar's long history of relations with other lingual regions in the Indian Ocean and beyond, well before the advent of Islam.³⁹

However, evidence from the region shows that the Arabic language continued to remain the *lingua dominate* in the oceanic 'everyday world' before the advent of the Portuguese presence.⁴⁰ Its growth from being the *lingua dominate* to *lingua dependentiam* in fourteenth-century Indian Ocean maritime networks resulted in considerable enthusiasm for learning Arabic among local elites and port town *rajās* in Malabar, and the Samuthiri rulers were also said to have learned it.⁴¹ Ibn Battuta referred to a couple of such local elites who learned Arabic before they embraced Islam in the fourteenth century.⁴² As this situation continued to exist in the early-sixteenth century, Portuguese delegates were forced to hire the services of Arabic-speaking bilingual interlocutors in order to communicate with the Samuthiri ruler who employed Arabic scholars as interpreters.⁴³ Portuguese sources show that Vasco da Gama took help from Martin Affonso and the Tunisian polyglot Moncaide who spoke Spanish and Malayalam at the Samuthiri court.⁴⁴ Alam and Subrahmanyam likewise detail how non-Muslim local notables from intermediary caste groups and native rulers

³⁵Words from other languages such as *serambi*-rest house (Malay regions) and *kanji*-porridge (Ming China) show how various lingual components influenced the polyglossic life in Malabar. This region also housed a few polyglossic Muslim navigators who were familiar with European languages in the early-sixteenth century. See M. N. Pearson, *The Portuguese in India* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 11.

³⁶Early Malayalam *kavya* texts also give us the detailed descriptions about the presence of people from different lingual-scriptorial regions, within India and outside. Written between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries, such texts indicate the multi-layered trading networks in medieval Kerala. See Kesavan Veluthat, "Trade, Markets and Urbanism: Perceptions of Literature from Medieval Kerala", *Studies in People's History* 2, 1 (2015), pp. 54–60.

³⁷Duarte Barbosa, *Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 147–148.

³⁸Bernard Cohen, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, 1996), p. 33.

³⁹S. A. A. Rizvi, "Islamic Proselytisation", in *Religion in South Asia*, (ed.) G. A. Oddie (New Delhi, 1991); Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1998).

⁴⁰Agius, *Classic Ships*, p. 87.

⁴¹K.V. Krishna Ayyar, *The Zamorins of Calicut* (Calicut, 1938). Similarly, Afanasy Nikitin, a fifteenth-century Russian trader who travelled in India was well versed in Arabic. He transliterated many polyglossic urban usages that were interspersed among Arabic, Persian and Turkish expressions, see Anto Knezevic, "The Case of Afanasii Nikitin: Some Remarks about a Political Friendship", *Islamic Studies* 33, 4 (1994), pp. 488–490.

⁴²*The Travels of Ibn Batuta*, pp. 170–171.

⁴³Alida C. Metcalf, *Go-between and the Colonization of Brazil: 1500–1600* (Austin, 2005), p. 32; K. K. N. Kurup, "Arabic Tradition in Kerala", in *Arabic in South India: Papers in Honour of Professor S. E. A. Nadvi*, (ed.) E. K. Ahmed Kutty (Calicut, 2003), p. 41.

⁴⁴Hein Jeanne, "On the Way to the East-Portuguese Communications with Africans on the Sea Route to India", in *The Globe Encircled and the World Revealed*, (ed.) Ursula Lamb (New York, 1995), pp. 9–10; European traders carried with them Arabic letters of correspondence to begin the initial conversations with local rulers in the Indian Ocean littoral region, see Ayyar, *The Zamorins*, p. 140.

were still communicating in Arabic with Portuguese administrators in the early sixteenth century.⁴⁵

Earlier, noticing such tendencies around Arabic language that evolved as both *lingua domine* and *lingua dependentiam* in fourteenth-century urban settlements in the Maghrib, Ibn Khaldun pointed out that the “dialects of the urban population follow the language of the nation or race that has control of or has founded them”.⁴⁶ Similarly, in Malabar the native elites and people, who were economically dependent on Arab traders, seem to have followed the same pattern when it came to diplomacy, commerce and port town administration. Malayalam-speaking local people in the agrarianate Calicut were also no less curious to learn the functional part of the *lingua dependentiam*.⁴⁷ A close reading of early fourteenth-century *manipravala* texts like *Unniyachi Charitam* indicate that native scribes in Kerala began to be influenced by multiple lingual expressions on the coasts and in the interior. When describing merchandise and traders in Malabar, the writer used the word *Allah'r*, referring to Muslims in the region as “people of Allah”.⁴⁸ Correspondingly, the fiscal opportunities derived from oceanic trade also encouraged non-Muslim merchants from the region to acquaint themselves with Arabic, and their ability to engage with it had become important for trading with African ports as well by the turn of the sixteenth century.⁴⁹

Apart from diplomatic and commercial interests, a large number of polyglossic *futhiya* Muslims made significant efforts to learn Arabic for religious purpose as early as the fourteenth century.⁵⁰ Their acquaintance with Arabic came through the expanding urban network of faith habitus around mosques, *dars* (schools) and religious authorities like *qadis* in Malabar. Evolved as a faith society under the aegis of urban faith-pietistic institutions where only Arabic texts were discussed, it was perhaps only to be expected that *futhiya* Muslims made conscious efforts to learn it. According to Ibn Battuta, memorising such texts remained the *maxima pars* of the pietistic selfhood of *futhiya* Muslims in the Indian Ocean littoral since Muslim scholars still depended on what we might be termed as ‘speak, hear, memorise’ method that had disseminated Islamic knowledge for centuries. Considering this method of learning as a major part of their newly-acquired religious selfhood, *futhiya* Muslims in Indian Ocean ports entered the world of Arabic, taking the first steps by memorising Quran.⁵¹ For them, basic familiarity with Arabic—‘the language of paradise’—represented one of the fundamentals of being a virtuous believer, though polyglossic Malayalam

⁴⁵Alam and Subrahmanyam, “Letters from Kannur”, pp. 115–125.

⁴⁶Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, translated by F. Rosenthal, (ed.) N. J. Dawood (London, 1967), p. 294.

⁴⁷This article uses ‘agrarianate city’ and ‘agrarianate society’ to reflect the fact that the nature of economic transactions in pre-colonial Calicut was largely based on agricultural products and services rather than manufactured goods.

⁴⁸*Unniyachi Charitam*, (ed.) P. K. Narayana Pillai (Trivandrum, 1970), p. 34; *Allah'r* could be understood as the first specific localised expression with which the local people identified Muslims in the region before they came to be known as Mappilas.

⁴⁹Hein, “On the Way to the East”, p. 9.

⁵⁰In the fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta reflected on the increasing network of Islamic institutions and Islamic habitus around mosques and shrines across Malabar where native Muslims could not hold religious posts such as *qadi* and *mufiti*. Most of these designated positions were kept by scholars from Oman, Baghdad and other such centres, see *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*.

⁵¹Gibb and Beckingham, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, p. 165.

remained the language of their non-religious everyday world.⁵² In addition, Islamic pietistic institutions like mosques remained under the scholastic authority of Arabic-speaking ulema from places such as Oman and Baghdad until the early-sixteenth century.⁵³

It is also plausible that Islamic pietistic institutions in Malabar provided agrarianate *futhiya* Muslims with the first opportunity to be trained in a scriptorial system. Most of those involved hailed from lower social groups and had scanty familiarity with the local *vattzhuthu* manuscript system and its derivatives like *kolezhuthu* and *malayanma* that together formed the early Malayalam script in the early-sixteenth century.⁵⁴ These scriptorial styles were widely used in religious institutions to write heavily Sanskritised Malayalam texts, making it prohibitive—both socially and physically—for lower social groups to engage with them. The subject matter of these texts indicate how they emerged from a brahmanical episteme that was only concerned with the moral and social concerns of upper caste communities in the region. Most dealt with puranic stories and brahmanical rituals, and were written and circulated by scribal elites belonging to dominant caste groups.⁵⁵ Initiation to Islam and education centres like *dars*, where preliminary teaching of Arabic was conducted, seems to have been *futhiya* Islam's first encounter with a stable scriptorial system in Malabar. Perczel's work on *Garshuni Malayalam* (Malayalam written in Syriac alphabets, mixing with old Malayalam letters) clearly demonstrates how initiation into a new religion could excite embryonic Christians to embrace a new script for their vernacular pietistic negotiation in the late-sixteenth century.⁵⁶ Similarly, the increasing pietistic self-awareness and familiarity with Arabic script of oral-literate *futhiya* Muslims led to the slow spread of the Arabi-Malayalam script in the pre-colonial period. However, we also need to recognise that Islamic scholars in Malabar continued to versify their texts in a lucid fashion—replete with stories—for a deeper and broader spatial penetration; after all, the majority of local Muslims remained outside the realm of writing and reading until the late nineteenth century.⁵⁷

These factors help us answer one of the fundamental questions—who invented the Arabi-Malayalam script? Scholars of pre-modern languages and scripts argue that tracing the invention of scripts should always go beyond the personal interests and inspirations of a single scribe since these evolve through multiple hands over a period of time.⁵⁸ Hence, the credit for inventing the Arabi-Malayalam script must be sought in the voluntary acts of a number of polyglossic native Muslim scribes with linguistic and scriptorial creativity. Their increasing familiarity with the Arabic script, Islamic texts, hortatory practices and theological discourses over centuries is likely to have played an important role in the evolution of this transliterative system for registering polyglossic coastal Malayalam in extended Arabic alphabets. In the

⁵²Tschacher, *Islam in Tamilnadu*, p. 3.

⁵³*The Travels of Ibn Battuta*; apparently Battuta presumed that native Muslims did not have the required cognitive competence for holding any such theological and legal positions.

⁵⁴N. V. Neeba, "Recognition of Malayalam Documents", in *Guide to OCR for Indic Scripts: Documents Recognition and Retrieval*, (eds.), Venu Govindaraju and Srirangaraj Setlur (London, 2009), p. 128.

⁵⁵A large number of such texts are preserved in the British Library and they include *Chadaingu* (sixteenth century), EAP584/1/4 Pt 2; *Aśaucadīpikā* (sixteenth century), EAP584/1/5 Pt 2; and *Tripura Sotra Vyakarana* [sixteenth century AD], EAP208/13/4.

⁵⁶Perczel, "Garshuni Malayalam".

⁵⁷For similar developments, see Velcheru Narayana Rao, *Text and Tradition in South India* (Albani, 2016), pp. 81–82.

⁵⁸Thomas O. Hollmann, *Chinese Script: History, Characters, Calligraphy* (New York, 2017).

process, Arabi-Malayalam scribes made a number of necessary orthographical additions and useful consonants, expanding the possibilities of Arabic alphabets. Even though the lack of evidence for both literisation of and literarisation in the Arabi-Malayalam script before the *Muhyuddinmala* would indicate a slow progression of the script, the structure, characteristics and the confidence of Qadi Muhammed in this particular text clearly suggests that Arabi-Malayalam as a script reached a stable stage for functional communications towards the end of the age of *fasad*.⁵⁹

However, since the script was only used by native Muslims and no other port town in Malabar reported any activities involving the Arabi-Malayalam script until the second quarter of the eighteenth century, a broader demographic picture of Calicut—the city of Qadi Muhammed—can provide an indication of the demographic and geographical canvas of the script's circulation before the seventeenth century. By the turn of the twentieth century, there were about 30,000 Muslims living within the municipal boundary of Calicut, but this was a much larger geographical area as compared to the port town that it had been in the sixteenth century.⁶⁰ In 1806, the total number of Muslims in the whole of colonial Malabar district (consisting of the present-day districts of Kannur, Kozhikode, Wayanad, Malappuram, Palakkad and parts of Thrissur) was around 170,000, averaging about 34,000 people in each of these districts.⁶¹ British officials, however, calculated this number about two centuries after Qadi Muhammed had authored the *Muhyuddinmala*. According to another British official record, the total population of Malabar reached about 140,000 by the second half of the eighteenth century and they were scattered across a vast geographical area, showing a smaller size of Muslim population about half a century ago.⁶² According to the 1871 census, Calicut city's total population was about 48,000.⁶³ From 1871 to 1901, the population growth rate in the city was consistently high, reaching as much as 16 per cent between 1891 and 1901. These calculations show that Subrahmanyam's assessment of Calicut city's sixteenth-century population—"not less than 50,000"—derives from a problematic calculation,⁶⁴ which seems to have stemmed from contemporary European accounts. It overlooks the fact that European travellers from sparsely-populated countries such as Portugal tended to exaggerate populations in South Asia for literary, religious and political effects. For instance, coming from post-'Black Death' Portugal, which registered one of the lowest population densities in the whole of Europe by the early fifteenth-century, Barbosa seems to have been carried away by the relatively denser populated regions of South Asia.⁶⁵

⁵⁹For such developments in the Jewish scribal sphere, see Paul Wexler, "Jewish Inter Linguistics: Facts and Conceptual Frame Work", *Language* 57, 1 (1981), p. 103.

⁶⁰*The Imperial Gazetteer of India: Bomjur to Central India*, vol. 9 (Oxford, 1901), p. 289.

⁶¹H. S. Graeme, *Report on the Revenue Administration of Malabar, 1822*, (ed.) J. Rejikumar (Thiruvananthapuram, 2010), p. 37.

⁶²Letter from the Principal Collector of Malabar to the BOR, *Settlement Report of Fusly*, 1242 (1832/33) dated 15 January, Volume 4817 (1834), pp. 30–35.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 289.

⁶⁴Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500–1650* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 23.

⁶⁵Susana Munch Miranda, "Coping with Europe and the Empire, 1500–1620", in *An Agrarian History of Portugal, 1000–2000: Economic Development on the European Frontier*, (eds.) Dulce Freire and Pedro Lains (Leiden, 2017), pp. 72–74; Barbosa makes many such exaggerated descriptions throughout his text, see Barbosa, *Description*, pp. 111–130.

As a commercially vibrant colonial municipality with better urban facilities, transportation, educational institutions, commercial centres, piety spots, and expansive social interactive spaces but with a total population of less than 50,000 people in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a much smaller Calicut could not have had the same resident population in the sixteenth century. Moreover, the city was marred by persistent violence, large-scale withdrawal and commercial decline in the age of *fasad*. Therefore, even if Barbosa's account, which placed the Muslim population at 20 per cent of the total population, is taken to be valid, the total number of native Muslims in the city could not have been more than a few thousands in the early sixteenth century.⁶⁶ Their number was further decreased after a significant section of the economically better-off Mappilas and their dependents withdrew into inland in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, once the Portuguese began to trounce Arab merchants in Indian Ocean ports, including the city of Calicut in particular.⁶⁷ Such factors point to a clear impossibility of an expansive Arabi-Malayalam scriptorial sphere in Malabar in the age of *fasad* or before, as a number of previous scholars would want us to believe.

Similarly, the complete archival, textual, inscriptional and folkloric absence of either literised or literarised Arabi-Malayalam in once-prosperous urban Calicut and other port towns like Kannur prior to the seventeenth century negates its expansive popularity and stability, which is an essential condition for the growth of such scripts. This absence also explains the attitude of the *ulema*, including Qadi Muhammed, who used Arabic for communicating with Muslims about Portuguese violence in Malabar and further afield.⁶⁸ Had Arabi-Malayalam reached a stable scriptorial maturity along with communicable literisation in the early-sixteenth century, Muslim scribes like Qadi Muhammed would have communicated their worries in this medium.

The conclusion to draw from this is that the Arabi-Malayalam script is most likely to have reached a literised form during the last quarter of the sixteenth century, alongside the Mappilas' evolution as a recognisable kinship-based polyglossic community in the Malabar interior. However, the major credit for shaping and circulating the script should still go to eighteenth-century vernacular scholar-scribes such as Kunjayin Musliyar, who expressed contemporary pain and delusions through his allegorical poetic expressions framed around

⁶⁶Barbosa, *Description*, p. 146; According to Varthema, the Mappila population was about 15,000 in the early-sixteenth century, far exceeding the description by Barbosa. Varthema's figure could be taken as exaggeration by a European who saw a considerable number of Muslims in a non-Islamic region, see Varthema, *Ludovico di Varthema*, p. 151. Similarly, the statement of Chinese traveller Ma Huan in the fifteenth century—"30,000 Muslims and more than twenty mosques"—also strains reality. Muslim traveller Abdu Razaq (fifteenth century), was closer to reality when he stated that there were only two mosques in the city and they were managed by a *qadi* and *imam*, and according to him the majority of the city population was non-Muslim.

⁶⁷In the interior of the country they (Mappilas) are very well provided with estates and farms", see Barbosa, *Description*, p. 146.

⁶⁸These texts included: Qadi Muhammed, *Al Qutubat al Jihadiya*, reprinted in *Aydyuludiya wa Nnidal* (Ideology and Struggle) (ed.) N. A. M. Abdul Kader (Calicut, 2012); *Qaseedat-al-Jihadiya*, reprinted in *Aydyuludiya wa Nnidal* (Ideology and Struggle), (ed.) N. A. M. Abdul Kader (Calicut, 2012); *Qasidat-al-Fath-al-Mubeen* (ed.) Mankada Abdul Aziz (Calicut, 1996); Zainuddin Makhдум I, *Tahreel Ahl-al Imani ala-Jihadi Abdat-a-Ssulban*, reprinted in Faisal Ahmed Bhaktali Nadwi, *Tahreel-e- Azadi me Ulema ka Kirdar: 1857se Pehele* (Lucknow, 2003); Zainuddin Makhдум II, *Tuhfat-al Mujahideen fi ba'd Akhbar al-Burtughaliyan*, translated by C. Hamsa (Calicut, 1999).

the weakened roles of Muslims in the eighteenth-century Indian Ocean trade.⁶⁹ However, the act of writing in vernacular language/script was yet to become a common habit among the Mappilas, including those who engaged in non-barter trade until the late-nineteenth century.⁷⁰ Bearing this in mind, several of the earlier imaginations regarding an expansive circulation of the Arabic-Malayalam script and literised materials before the last quarter of the sixteenth century would appear to be at odds with a range of historical realities.

Literarising the Literised: Qadi Muhammed and the *Muhyuddinmala*

As pointed out earlier, the polyglossic social field in various port towns of the region shaped the larger economic, political, moral, literary and pietistic developments in Malabar before the sixteenth century. As Calicut city lost its status as the most attractive maritime port in South Asia in the early-sixteenth century and local Muslims withdrew into inland, Muslim scholar-scribes produced a new literary genre, symptomatic of the reconfigured social and moral space of the region from the seventeenth century onwards. As the *ulema* began to literise polyglossic Malayalam in the transliterative Arabi-Malayalam, Malabar witnessed a transition from Arabic-based literary engagements. However, this transition remained slow until the mid-eighteenth century, which marked the second stage of Arabi-Malayalam literary production. However, recent studies have revealed how such vernacular prescriptive poetries and texts from non-Persianate marginal regions remain overlooked in existing anglophone historiography.⁷¹

As there is no compelling evidence to identify who started literising—converting the dialect into writing—polyglossic Malayalam in the Arabi-Malayalam script, the credit for its literarisation—converting the literised into literature—can be traced to Qadi Muhammed (d. 1616). He remains the only identifiable Arabi-Malayalam litterateur during, what can be termed ‘the age of transition’ that broadly covers the period from the early seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century.⁷² Qadi Muhammed composed the *Muhyuddinmala* a year after he was ‘anointed’ as Calicut’s *qadi* (1606), following the death of his father Qadi Abdul Aziz.⁷³ Indicating the logic of a new textual format in a transliterative script, Qadi Muhammed maintained that “Oh, people, I have strung *Muhyuddinmala*, by joining together *mutthum* (pearl) and *manikyam* (ruby)”.⁷⁴ Qadi Muhammed seems to have deployed the allegory of ‘pearl’ (an expensive oceanic commodity) to designate the Arabic script that was the form of the *Muhyuddinmala*, while using ‘ruby’ (an expensive terrestrial object) to

⁶⁹P. K. Yasser Arafath, “Malayalam, Malabari and Arabi-Malayalam”, *Madhyamam Weekly* 21 (2018), pp. 36–49.

⁷⁰VOC/OB 2310, MiD, fol.1218 vo), cited in Rene J. Barendse, *Arabian Seas 1700–1763: The Western Indian Ocean in the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 1 (Leiden, 2009), p. 85.

⁷¹Thibaut D’Hubert, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Alaol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan* (Oxford, 2018); Pankaj Jha, *A Political History of Literature: Vidyapati and the Fifteenth Century* (New Delhi, 2019).

⁷²The second quarter of the eighteenth century marked the beginning of the second wave of Arabi-Malayalam literarisation in the region with the writings of Kunjayin Musliyar (1700–86?), whose texts include *Nool Madh* (1737), *Kappappattu* (1750s) and *Noolmala* (1785) as mentioned above. See Moulavi and Kareem, *Mahattaya Mappila*, pp. 162–168; V. Hikmathulla, “Kunjayin Musliyarude Noolmala, Soofi Bhavanayude Prathalangal”, *Thelichem Magazine* 18, 5 (2017), pp. 30–33.

⁷³Parappil Mammad Koya, *Kozhikotte Muslimklude Charitram* (Calicut, 1994), p. 144.

⁷⁴“*Mutthum Manikyavum Onnayi Kothapol, Muhyuddin Malena Kottnan Jnan Lokare*”, *Muhyuddinmala*, p. 3.

denote polyglossic spoken Malayalam that formed the matter of the text.⁷⁵ Freeman's ethno-anthropological study of south Indian languages like *Manipravalam bhasha*—an elite linguistic derivative in pre-colonial Kerala—points to a long history of such differentiating usages by non-Muslim writers in the region more widely.⁷⁶

In the process of literarisation, Qadi Muhammed adopted an Arabic scriptorial register with sufficient orthographic incorporation, blending them with the existing Malayalam grammar and visibly building on the existing pattern of the Arabi-Malayalam script.⁷⁷ The existence of such a script is not only indicated in suggestive expressions such as *dushkam kootathe ithine eshudukil*⁷⁸ (which asks Muslim scribes to be cautious and perfect while copying the text), but also in his admission about the advice and direction that he received from scribal-scholars (*arivalan*) in the region.⁷⁹ Similarly, he kept the grammatical and structural essentials of the Malayalam language, just as all other transliterating scribes in the Indian Ocean Islamicate network did. Living in the vast lingual repository of Malabar, Qadi Muhammed also brought together a large number of polyglossic expressions in the *Muhyiddinmala*, including *balath* (the right side - Malayalam), *pakkiyam* (blessing - Malayalam), *ustad* (master - Persian), and *keel* (underneath - Tamil).⁸⁰ He used these popular polyglossic terminologies along with a number of specific Islamic expressions like *thuwawaf* (circumambulation) as literary units, clearly seeking to reach out to an 'oral-literate' Mappila audience that was different from those whom he had addressed earlier in his Arabic texts during the age of *fasad*. Here, Qadi Muhammed seems to have identified himself as a naturalised regional scholar through Malayalam structure and grammar, while the retention of Arabic and Persian expressions in the text definitely strengthened his authority as a *qadi*.⁸¹

Qadi Muhammed, as the first known Muslim scribal alchemist in Malabar, thus performed a scribal pirouette in 1607, and the *Muhyiddinmala* became the first identifiable literary text in Arabi-Malayalam. His acts—a syntactically veracious application of the polyglossic language, employment of modified Arabic alphabets, together with the use of highly sophisticated literary expressions (three determinant factors of literarisation)—can

⁷⁵The polyglossic language in Malabar was known by different expressions and came to be established as 'Malayalam' in the early-eighteenth century. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, terms such as *Malayazhma*, *Malayanma* and *Malayalma* were used to categorise the language of Malabar. Barbosa described it as *Maleama*, an expression that came to his Lusophone tongue. The *Hortus Malabarius*, another seventeenth-century text, indicates that the term 'Malayalam' was used interchangeably to denote the region of Kerala and its language, see Hendrik Van Rhede, *Horti Malabari* (Amsterdam, 1678). Therefore, there is no reason to believe that Qadi Muhammed who lived in Calicut in the same century was unaware of these terms such as 'Malayalam' and *Malayanma*. Similarly, in the early-eighteenth century, Johann Ernst Hanxleden (Arnos Pathiri) used the term 'Malayalam' in his *Vocabulario Malavarico* (1732) a Portuguese-English dictionary, to indicate the region and its people while using 'Malame' for the language they spoke. For a detailed discussion about this development, see Arafath, 'Malayalam, Malabari', pp. 36–49. Therefore, this article uses 'Malayalam' as a colligatory lingual term to indicate the coastal language of the natives who called it by different names in the seventeenth century before it entered into the larger bracket of 'Malayalam' in the early-eighteenth century.

⁷⁶Freeman, "Rubies and Coral", p. 58.

⁷⁷Roland Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends* (Madras, 1992), p. 289.

⁷⁸*Muhyiddinmala*, p. 14; Qadi's verse involving *eshudukil*, a polyglossic expression for the act of 'writing', clearly shows that he intended to caution the scribal section among Muslims who used *Arabi-Malayalam* script for non-pietistic engagements. According to Qadi Muhammed, scriptorial mistakes would cost them the anger of God and the Saint.

⁷⁹*Muhyiddinmala*, p. 2.

⁸⁰*Muhyiddinmala*, pp. 2–6.

⁸¹*Muhyiddinmala*, p. 3.

be defined an act of ‘scribal sublimation’ that shaped a prescriptive pietistic text for liturgical and performative Mappila consumption.⁸² His literarisation act can also be termed as ‘ulemiite alchemy’ thanks to how it made long-lasting structural changes in the nature of Islamic texts and the content of pietistic discourses in the early seventeenth century.⁸³ These inter-related concepts—‘ulemiite alchemy’ and ‘scribal sublimation’—are used here to indicate a range of linguistic and literary acts that Qadi Muhammed systemised in the *Muhyiddinmala*. They include deviation (from Arabic to polyglossic Malayalam), inversion (from valour-centric genre to the genre of piety), innovation (new consonants and alphabets) and co-option (use of existing grammar and syntax), which together galvanised a vernacular pietistic dynamism in the ‘age of transition’ in Malabar.⁸⁴

Qadi Muhammed’s literarisation happened at around the same time as similar scribal sublimations were taking place among other Indian Ocean communities and regions. For instance, Christian scholar-scribes with considerable ecclesiastical supports were able to shape Syriac-Malayalam (*Garshuni*), in which old Malayalam was written in Syriac alphabets with additional consonants. As a scriptorial-lingual tradition, *Garshuni* became very influential in the religious sphere of vernacular Christians in the sixteenth century itself.⁸⁵ Perczel points out how the scriptorial absence in the life of St Thomas-Christians in Kerala paved the way for its emergence in the sixteenth century.⁸⁶ In another important study, Tschacher shows the ways in which such ‘alchemist’ *ulema* on the Coromandel coast designed their own sublimated transliteration in Arawi/Arabi-Tamil in the last quarter of the seventeenth century.⁸⁷ In her significant research on Jewish-Malayalam, Gamliel identifies a longer history of such scribal alchemy by Jewish scribes who used Hebrew script for writing didactic texts.⁸⁸ This article likewise argues that Qadi Muhammed designed the *Muhyiddinmala* as an orally transmittable performative text for a sustainable vernacular communication among the oral-literate Mappilas.⁸⁹ Therefore, in line with Pollock’s conceptual category, namely “vernacular innovation”, we can say that Qadi Muhammed emerged as the pioneer Islamic vernacular ‘alchemist’ in the ‘Ma’bar to Malabar Complex’ of the Indian Ocean littoral.⁹⁰ Until the *Muhyiddinmala*, we have no record of such sublimated Islamic texts in this ‘complex’

⁸² *Muhyiddinmala*, pp. 1–5.

⁸³ For the concepts—‘alchemy’ and ‘sublimation’—I am largely indebted to Rajani Sudan whose recent work uses these terminologies while examining the ways in which British colonialism changed the meanings and characters of geographical territories, commodities and technologies in India over a period of time. Sudan argues that the British introduced a range of new meanings and changes through the acts of adaptation and strategic accommodation to strengthen their political and intellectual agenda in the eighteenth century. See Rajani Sudan, *The Alchemy of Empire: Abject Materials and Technologies of Colonialism* (New York, 2016), pp. 10–15.

⁸⁴ In order to get a brief picture of such acts, see, Ophira Gamliel, “On the Warp and Woof of Language: Arabic, Malayalam and the Muhyidin Mala”, *Ishal Paithrikam Thrimasika* 15 (2017), pp. 24–30.

⁸⁵ Scaria Zacharia, *Udayanperuhurh Sunahadosinte Canonakal* (Palai, 1995), pp. 56–57.

⁸⁶ Perczel, “Garshuni Malayalam”, pp. 263–323.

⁸⁷ Tschacher, *Islam in Tamilnadu*.

⁸⁸ Ophira Gamliel, “Jewish Malayalam” and “Fading Memories and Linguistic Fossils in Jewish Malayalam”, in *Oral History Meets Linguistics*, (eds.) Erich Kasten, Katja Roller and Joshua Wilburn (Havel, 2016), pp. 83–106.

⁸⁹ Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (New Delhi, 2011), p. 336.

⁹⁰ I take my cue from Shahab Ahmed’s terminology—“Balkans-to-Bengal”—to identify the geographical, lingual, political and religious connectedness operating between Malabar and Ma’bar from early medieval period, see Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, 2016), pp. 82–83. The multiple connectivity which included theological, scholastic and maritime exchanges in the ‘Ma’bar to Malabar Complex’ became very crucial in the developments of Islamic religious institutions and textual traditions in the Indian Ocean region from the fifteenth century.

that connected a variety of micro-Muslim habitus with shared belief systems and *shafite* theo-legal adherence.⁹¹ The complete absence—archival and oral—of this kind of poetic texts prior to the *Muhyiddinmala* also suggests that earlier *ulema* did not delve into the potential of sublimated literarisation while engaging with transitional Islamic communities.

Indeed, *Muhyiddinmala*'s lucidly written stanzas, allegorical reflection and popular stories of Sufi miracles clearly show how Qadi Muhammed realised the potential of linguistic effervescence and the orality of the Mappilas, most of whom still remained scriptorally inept.⁹² In the process, he admitted polyglossic coastal Malayalam into literacy, then “accommodated to literature” through the process of literarisation, as argued by Pollock in another context.⁹³ *Muhyiddinmala* also reflects Qadi Muhammed's confidence regarding the oral and performative disseminability of such texts among vernacular Muslims. Subsequently, Qadi's scribal sublimation in a transformative polyglossic text through scriptorial, lingual and textual modification contributed to the growth of the Malayalam language's ‘regionalisation’, which was already in process at this time.⁹⁴

Apart from the language and script, two other things also stand out in Qadi Muhammed's attempt to localise his own scribal self. The first was his introduction of *Kollavarsham*, the vernacular calendar in Malayalam, in this text in place of the *Hijra* calendar that was considered a mandatory element in Islamic texts. Secondly, Qadi Muhammed's insistence on Calicut as his birthplace displays the innate desire of a scholar to present his localised scribal self before a new vernacular audience through an effective self-neutralisation of his former identity as a complete Arabic litterateur.

Birth of A Text: From Valour to Piety

In the age of *fasad*, Qadi Muhammed and contemporary scholars like Makdhum II undertook a range of literary engagements—both hortatory and oratory—explaining the nature of violence and collapse of trade, which collectively resulted in Mappilas' large scale withdrawal into the agrarian interiors of Malabar in the sixteenth century.⁹⁵ Written in Arabic, these texts discussed with great enthusiasm many ideas such as valour, masculinity, manhood and martyrdom, which could be used against the Portuguese. These ideas provided urban Muslims with a sense of resistance and self-confidence in the wake of chaos that included the withdrawal of trading communities, dilapidated courts, perpetual conflicts between micro-regional kingdoms and tensions between various religious communities in the

⁹¹According to Ronit Ricci, literisation of *Arabi-Tamil* texts only began around the end of the seventeenth century and the reasons can be found in vernacular scholars' strong familiarity with Tamil script, unlike Muslim scholars in Malabar, see Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and The Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago, 2011), p. 171.

⁹²*Muhyiddinmala*, p. 14.

⁹³Sheldon Pollock, “India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000–1500”, *Daedalus* 127 (1998), p. 41.

⁹⁴For the regionalisation of Malayalam language, see E. V. Ramakrishnan, “Language, Power and Ideology: The Changing Contexts of Bhasha in India”, in *Language Policy and Education in India: Documents, Contexts and Debates*, (eds.) Sridhar and Sunita Mishra (Oxford, 2017), pp. 57–58.

⁹⁵Scholars have paid very little attention to the Portuguese genocidal violence in various Indian Ocean regions. It is only very recently that historians have started engaging with the genocidal aspects of the Portuguese violence in Malabar and connected places such as Mecca, see Arafath, “Malabar Ulema”, pp. 25–68; Mahmood Kooria, “Killed the Hajj-pilgrims and Persecuted Them: Portuguese Estado da India's Encounters with Hajj Pilgrimage, Sixteenth Century”, in *The Hajj and Europe in the Age of Empire*, (ed.) Umar Ryad (Leiden, 2017).

region.⁹⁶ Muslim literati at this time saw them as a troubled phase in Indian Ocean history and were keen to place God, the Quran and the early companions of the Prophet at the forefront of their discussions in order to revitalise the masculine energy and communitarian kinship of urban Muslims. The *ulema* transformed these Islamic ideas from mere textual concepts into a set of social stimulants, redefining notions of resistance, piety and masculinity. In a different context, scholars like Rao have identified how non-Muslim scholars and poets composed similar texts in other parts of south India, negotiating the oral-literate possibilities of their targeted audience in pre-modern world of knowledge production.⁹⁷

In the *Muhyiddinmala*, Qadi Muhammed made use of existing polyglossic lingual registers among the Mappilas for addressing the shifting social framework in the region, like scholars argued in other contexts.⁹⁸ The intricate lingual, scriptorial and scribal transformations that it contains were no different to other vernacular texts that were deeply connected with political, economic and moral shifts in such times of transition.⁹⁹ Qadi found a language of analogy for effectively stating a range of issues that Muslims would encounter in their new territories. Scattered throughout his text, and on the basis of his experience as an urban literati, as well as the religious authority of agrarian Muslims in the interior, he highlighted a range of issues, such as cultural disturbances, poverty, starvation, loss of patronage, lack of protection, moral transgression, ritual absence, everyday fear, lack of learning, deception, epidemic, social status, false pride, weak harvest, conversion and natural calamities such as heavy rain and flood in the region of Malabar.¹⁰⁰

By actualising a transitory reactivation beyond the normalcy of Arabic language and texts, the *Muhyiddinamala* established Qadi Muhammed's evolution as an 'author' who inserted a new discourse into completely different geographical as well as material domains.¹⁰¹ It is very clear from this text that Qadi Muhammed sought to "characterise the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within" the Mappila community in the age of transition.¹⁰² Thus, he asked Muslims in the region to follow the pietistic life of Muhyiddin Abdul Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166), the Baghdadi Sufi who was extremely popular among Islamic communities across South Asia. In the *Muhyiddinmala*, Jilani was identified as the perfect solution to these new issues thanks to his being regarded as the *Gaus-e-Azam*—

⁹⁶According to Varthema, the city of Calicut "was ruined by the king of Portugal", see *The Travels of Ludovico*, p. 178; a decade later Barbosa agreed that "after that the King of Portugal made himself master there, and these Moors [*pardesil*] saw that they could not defend it, they began to leave the country, and little by little they went away from it, so that very few of them remain", *Descriptions*, p. 147.

⁹⁷Velcheru Narayana Rao, "Purana as Brhmanic Ideology", in *Purana Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts*, (ed.) Wendy Doniger (Albany, 1993), p. 95; also see Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield (eds.), *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India* (Cambridge, 2015); Allison Busch, "Hidden in Plain View: Braj Bhasha Poets at the Mughal Court", *Modern Asian Studies* 44, 2 (2010), p. 290.

⁹⁸Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990), pp. 59–88.

⁹⁹See, Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (Oxford, 2002); Sumit Guha, "Speaking Historically: The Changing Voices of Historical Narration in Western India, 1400–1900", *The American Historical Review* 109, 4 (2004), pp. 1084–1103; Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700–1960* (New Delhi, 2007); Veena Naregal, *Language Politics, Elites and the Public Sphere: Western India under Colonialism* (New Delhi, 2001).

¹⁰⁰*Muhyiddinmala*, pp. 4–12.

¹⁰¹For this debate, see Michel Foucault, "What is An Author", in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, (ed.) Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, 1997), p. 134.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, p. 124.

the supreme succour—with his permanent divine authority and the ability to listen with patience and diligence to the cries of his followers.¹⁰³ It was Jilani's eternal intimacy with God and his power to generate polymorphous *karamat* (miracles) that made him the most powerful helper in troubled times.¹⁰⁴ Not only did he take responsibility for strengthening the pietistic spirit of a morally intransigent Mappila community but he also saved people from wild animals, reptiles and natural calamities.¹⁰⁵ Visibly worried about the possibility of devious moralities emerging in the new Mappila settlements, Qadi Muhammed claimed that “when my [Jilani] followers transgress their piety path; I would hold their hand and protect them”.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Mappilas were assured that Jilani had been given special powers to cure a range of diseases, enhance harvests and generate multiple forms of knowledge in troubled times. Interestingly, South Asian vernacular literati had evolved similar scribal strategies earlier, and similar acts were reflected in the writings of Brahmin scribal elites who wanted to engage with ‘Hindu’ vernacular audiences familiar with *puranic* stories and imaginations.¹⁰⁷

Qadi Muhammed justified the presence of a charismatic Sufi protector in the quotidian life of Mappilas, describing Jilani as the ultimate teacher of Islamic rituals and observances. He explained Jilani's perfect embodiment of Islamic virtues as something for Mappilas to emulate in their pursuit of ‘self awareness’ and power. *Futhiya* Islam in new Mappila settlements were specifically guaranteed Jilani's divine blessings as they sought self-knowledge and learning.¹⁰⁸ In a couple of guiding verses, Qadi Muhammed stated that Jilani attained his pietistic selfhood through proper ritual and moral adherences, consisting of daily prayers (*tholthovar*), fasting (*ramadan*), repentance (*tawba*), pilgrimage (*hajj*), Quran recitation (*khatham theerthovar*) and hortatory acts like *wa'ad* (religious propagation).¹⁰⁹ In the absence of enough religious teachers in the interior and in towns, Jilani's charisma as a divinely-ordained teacher-preacher communicated in a circulatory poetic text made a significant impact in the new inland settlements, most of which were distant from urban educational institutions and professional religious authorities such as *qadis* and *muftis*.

Furthermore, in a couple of instructive couplets, Qadi Muhammed asked Muslims to disseminate the *Muhyiddinmala* through careful writing/copying (*eshudukkil*), singing (*chon-norkku*) and listening (*kekunmorkkum*), all of which would ensure both God's and the Sufi's divine blessings in the material world and a place in the beautiful houses (*manimadam*) of paradise.¹¹⁰ However, Qadi Muhammed expressed his trepidation about potential mis-handling of the text and cautioned Muslim copyists and writers against the erratic use of the script and language, as such derelictions would bring divine anger upon them.¹¹¹ Indeed,

¹⁰³ *Muhyiddinmala*, pp. 5–6.

¹⁰⁴ Qadi informs the readers that the Sufi was qualified to ensure the protection of Muslims and “God addresses the sufi as the supreme succor” (*Avannam Allah Fadachavan Thaan Thanne, Ya Gawzul Ennu Allah Vilichovar*), *Muhyiddeenmala*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ *Muhyiddinmala*, pp. 5–12.

¹⁰⁶ *Muhyiddinmala*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ Veena Naregal, “Colonial Bilingualism and Hierarchies of Language and Power”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, 49 (1999), pp. 3446–3456.

¹⁰⁸ *Muhyiddinmala*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ *Muhyiddinmala*, pp. 8–10.

¹¹⁰ “May Allah bless those who utter it, may Allah bless those who sing and hear this *Muhyiddinmala*”, *Muhyiddinmala*, p. 14.

¹¹¹ *Muhyiddinmala*, p. 14.

drawing on the Foucauldian concept of “initiators of discursive practices”, we could argue that Qadi Muhammed emerged as the founder of Islamic vernacular discursivity in Malabar thanks to his insistence on ‘writings’ that would eventually lead to the making of an “endless possibility of discourse” in the region.¹¹² Being the first vernacular Muslim scholar to speak about the relevance of ‘writing’, Qadi Muhammed also directs us back to the fact that at least a section of elite sedentary Mappilas had established an intimate relationship with the Arabi-Malayalam script by the early-seventeenth century. His text marked a significant progression in the act of ‘learning’ among oral-literate Mappilas whose cognitive and discursive structure was mostly shaped by the act of intuitive listening (*sama*) in which hortatory practices such as *wa’ad* (advises/preaching) and *qutba* (sermon) were pivotal constituencies.¹¹³ Thus, the *Muhyuddinnmala*’s emphasis on writing, singing and listening represented a major step towards the formation of vernacular piety within the local Muslim religious public sphere.¹¹⁴ It proved instrumental in creating a vernacular performative network of collective remembrance, a continuation of what Arabic poetic texts had done during the age of *fasad*. For instance, Zainuddin Makhdum I’s *Manqus Mawlid* reflects the development of such collective renditions in the religious public sphere of Muslims in the early-sixteenth century in which a range of diverse groups such as Sufis, traders, scholars, travellers and artisans participated.¹¹⁵ Even though the emergence of Arabi-Malayalam lithographic print boosted the life of Arabic liturgical texts—for instance, the popularity of the *Manqus Mawlid* in Muslim discursive practices in the nineteenth century—we must remember that in the early-sixteenth century their audience remained mostly in port towns.¹¹⁶

Thus, through the *Muhyuddinnmala*, Qadi Muhammed sketched out a vernacular and performative agenda for a larger communitarian liturgical consumption outside the port town regions. Not only did he use a range of relatable allegorical narratives delivered through a Sufi mouthpiece, but also he also shaped the formation of an Islamic vernacular liturgy. Jilani accordingly emerged as the Mappilas’ immediate interlocutor who was bestowed upon them by God to safeguard their interests. Qadi Muhammed’s idea of the collective remembrance of God through the medium of a Sufi seems to represent an epistemic continuum of early medieval Islamic scholars like Abu Nasr al-Farabi (870–950) who highlighted the necessity of pietistic and literary endeavours for the creation of virtuous Muslim habitus and cities in the middle ages.¹¹⁷

The literarisation of Arabi-Malayalam and composition of the *Muhyuddinnmala* also tell us what it meant to be a *qadi* (jurist) in a troubled time. It was important for Qadi Muhammed

¹¹²Foucault, “What is an Author”, p. 131.

¹¹³Qadi refers to the intuitive teaching methods of Jilani who, according to him, made deep impact on Muslims through his hortatory speaking methods like *wa’ad*, *Muhyuddinnmala*, pp. 8–9. It is to be noted that Qadi himself wrote many hortatory texts like *Al Qutub al Jihadiya* (Calicut, 2012).

¹¹⁴For Islamic religious public sphere, see Dale F. Eickelman, “The Religious Public Sphere in Early Muslim Societies”, in *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, (eds.) Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Nahemia Levzion (Albany, 2002).

¹¹⁵Zainuddin Makhdum I, *Manqus Mawlid*, translated by Muhammed Baqavi (Tirurangadi, 2014); also see Ar-fath, *Malabar Ulema*, pp. 48–49.

¹¹⁶Muhammed Mawlawi, *Khil’at-ul Jamal fi Tarjamati al-Manqus* (Thirurangadi, 1927); *Mawlid Manqus*, (ed.) P. Kunji Ahmed (Telicherry, 1875); *Mawlid Manqus*, (ed.), N. Abu (Telicherry, 1883); all these versions have been preserved in the Asian and African Reading Room, British Library, and I accessed them in 2017.

¹¹⁷Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *Mabadi ara ahl al-Madina al-fadila*, translated by Richard Walzer, *Al-Farabi on The Perfect State* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 201–245.

to state his authorship and designation as the ‘*Qadi* of Calicut’ in order to make a purposeful categorisation of the signifier,¹¹⁸ who could legitimise his craftsmanship to initiate a new format of piety against the backdrop of cultural and material changes in the region. However, connecting the social birth of the *Muhyiddinmala* with that of Qadi Muhammed’s status as a belligerent religious functionary in Calicut has not previously been considered important in existing scholarship. After stating his scribal ability to literarise Arabi-Malayalam, Qadi Muhammed registered his much recognised autonomous authority—*Qadi*—as well:

*I, Qadi Muhammed of Calicut,
Crafted this poem,
As it was advised by (other) ulema.*¹¹⁹

According to Foucault, such scribal assertions—explicit mentions of name and designation—had emerged as a major literary tendency across the world by the seventeenth century since the author’s anonymity and mysterious existence were no longer appreciated by readers. Not only the legitimacy, but also the “the meaning and value attributed to the text depended” on the sharing of this kind of important information.¹²⁰ Similarly, such self-referential statements in the *Muhyiddinmala* were supported by a number of verses in which Qadi Muhammed details the importance of acquiring religious knowledge from learned men who formed a crucial part of Muslims’ desires to be virtuous in troubled times.¹²¹

It seems evident that Qadi Muhammed took prompts from the pedagogical framework of Islamic learning traditions across South Asia when it came to establishing his scholastic authority to vernacularise Islamic circulatory memories in the Indian Ocean region.¹²² His invocations of scribal, legal and lingual authority can thus be viewed a continuation of the genealogical legitimation that he established in *Fath-al-Mubeen*, a text that dealt with ideas of masculinity and valour in the age of *fasad*. In it, Qadi Muhammed talked about his father Qadi Abdul Aziz who served as the *Qadi* of Calicut until his death in 1606.¹²³ Mappila genealogists like Parappil Mammad Koya believe that Abdul Aziz’s charismatic genealogy can be traced to Sheikh Muhammed D’iuddin who was the *Qadi* of Calicut in the last quarter of the fourteenth century. D’iuddin’s own genealogical roots then go back to Muhammed Bin Malik, a prominent member of the first Muslim group to arrive in Kerala, and Qadi Muhammed is believed to be the eighth-generation descendant of D’iuddin’s family.¹²⁴ Whatever the truth may be, Qadi Muhammed connected his scribal legitimacy and scholastic authority with the memory of his charismatic father, in line with a common tendency among medieval Islamic scholars to systematically draw attention to their genealogical privileges in order to push aggressively the ‘trustworthiness of their enterprises’, intellectual and religious.¹²⁵

¹¹⁸Foucault, “What is An Author”, p. 127.

¹¹⁹*Muhyiddinmala*, p. 3.

¹²⁰Foucault, “What is An Author”, pp. 126–127.

¹²¹*Muhyiddinmala*, p. 8.

¹²²Nile Green, “The Uses of Books in a Late Mughal Takiyya: Persianate Knowledge Between Person and Paper”, *Modern Asian Studies* 44, 2 (2010), pp. 241–265.

¹²³Qadi Muhammed, *Fath-al-Mubeen*, p. 32

¹²⁴Mammad Koya, *Kozhikotte Muslimklude* (Calicut, 1994), pp. 144–145.

¹²⁵Mimi Hanaoka, *Authority and Identity in Medieval Islamic Historiography: Persian Histories from the Peripheries* (New York, 2016), p. 109.

The construction of this genealogical and pietistic legitimacy appears to have played a decisive role in the dissemination of the *Muhyiddinmala* as an in-house performative text across Malabar. As a result, Jilani evolved into a house hold name in Malabar. *Muhyiddinmala*'s description of Jilani as a charismatic divine representative on earth with polymorphous existence—temporal and spatial—not only created a *longue duree* memory of this Sufi, but also produced a substantial number of loyal followers across the region. The remarkable lingual, tonal and thematic semblances that some of the eighteenth-century polyglossic *mala* texts like *Noolmala* share with the *Muhyiddinmala* corroborate the proposition that Jilani's memory was continuously reproduced through what Nile Green has described as the “mnemonic internalisation” of the *Muhyiddinmala* by the Mappilas from the second quarter of the seventeenth century.¹²⁶

This *longue duree* memory of Jilani in Malabar was also captured in a mid-nineteenth-century colonial document, entitled ‘Correspondence on Moplah Outrages in Malabar 1849–53’. Probably the first colonial recognition of the *Muhyiddinmala*, this document points out the liturgical and performative continuity of the *Muhyiddinmala* in the everyday life of Mappilas.¹²⁷ According to this document, Muslims believed that the recitation and performance of *Moidinmala-Pata* (*sic*) secured them “immediate successes” in their ordinary life engagements.¹²⁸ Similarly, numerous reprinted editions of the *Muhyiddinmala* in the nineteenth century and substantial improvisations and modifications in the early twentieth century support the *longue duree* existence of the Sufi and the influence of this text.¹²⁹ Most of the early twentieth century improvisations such as *Shaikh Muhyiddin Bayt* (1909), *Puthiya Muhyiddinmala* (1910), *Muhyiddin Manqus* (1923), and *Muhyiddin Qaissappattu* (1930) demonstrate how the content and structure of a range of performative texts remained “within the field of discourse” that Qadi Muhammed had initiated in the seventeenth century.¹³⁰

Conclusion

As it has been acknowledged, the first section of this article is not based on definite evidence and the unavailability of this means that we cannot reconstruct an empirical history of the Arabi-Malayalam script prior to the seventeenth century. However, in an attempt to connect significant dots in the existing scholarship, this article has sought to rethink the historicity of the Arabi-Malayalam script “in the company of reason” based on probabilities and human experiences as Emmanuel Kant pointed out in the late eighteenth century in a similar context.¹³¹ Thus, it has suggested that the fostering of Arabi-Malayalam—script and texts—needs to be located in both the multilingual cosmopolitanism and the everyday interactive experiences of Malabar Muslims who were connected by a common religion but separated

¹²⁶Green, “The Uses of Books”, p. 244.

¹²⁷*Correspondence on Moplah Outrages in Malabar for the Years 1849–53* (Madras, 1863), India Office Library, V/3212, p. 251.

¹²⁸*Moplah Outrages*, p. 251.

¹²⁹This author has collected the copies published in the years 1874, 1875, and 1876.

¹³⁰Foucault, “What is an Author”, p. 132.

¹³¹Emmanuel Kant, one of the foremost German philosophers of the Enlightenment, points out such necessary interpretation of history based on probabilities and human experiences in order to explain certain historical period and incidents. See Emmanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History and Morals*, translated by Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis, 1983), pp. 49–51.

by different languages in its pre-colonial ports. These agrarianate port towns possessed a long history of triple confluence—maritime network, inland migration and liturgical experiences—that created an interlinked socio-lingual sphere in the region, much like equivalent places elsewhere.¹³² Accordingly, the confluence of these factors shaped Arabi-Malayalam as the first sublimated Islamic scriptorial form in south India outside of the Deccan in the early-seventeenth century.

In the wake of intensified Portuguese violence in the Indian Ocean maritime grid, sixteenth-century Muslim literati seem to have considered Malabar, and Calicut in particular, to be a cosmopolitan dystopia as a significant number of Arab traders and Mappilas withdrew from its urban habitus. As the *Muhyiddinmala* underlines, Qadi Muhammad sensed the loss of Arabic habits among Muslims in these new contexts, and so experimented with the possibilities of a non-Arabic polyglossic language through which to disseminate Islamic pietistic knowledge in the region.¹³³ In the process, he used the potential of vernacular collective remembrance and popularised a ‘system of writing’ among the Mappilas, who by now were contemplating the possibilities of their sedentary habitus in the agrarian hinterland. Qadi Muhammed’s *ulemiite* alchemy, thus, resulted in a polyglossic poetic text in an accessible scriptorial register, which brought together Arabic script, polyglossic *dialectica frequente* of the region, a new communitarian rendition style and the community of oral-literate Mappilas. This new tradition of knowledge production subsequently produced a range of literary genres in Arabi-Malayalam across Kerala through similar processes to those that can be witnessed outside this particular region.¹³⁴

The images and descriptions that Qadi Muhammed used in his own Arabic texts—warriors, Prophet’s companions, *shaheeds* (martyrs), valorous masculinity and maritime disturbances—were now supported by the Sufi, his *karamat* sequences, ritual observances, pietistic manhood and agrarian allusions. Qadi Muhammed’s poetic allegories and mimetic expressions espoused the spiritual authority of Jilani as the nearest saving grace for oral-literate Muslims in the age of transition, expanding Mappila’s pietistic imagination from God’s invisible actions to Jilani’s direct and immediate interferences. Hence, he deployed the pietistic charisma and polyamorous *karamat* of Jilani as a reliable protective shield, as Mappilas became disenchanted with local rulers who were extending their patronage to the Portuguese. Now this vernacularised cosmopolitan Sufi became the putative protector of the Mappilas who were asked to believe in his abilities to generate solutions to the issues that faced them in the seventeenth century. What the *Muhyiddinmala* also shows us is that Qadi Muhammed was successful in presenting a particular kind of Islamic memory that was simultaneously located both near and far. By imagining the clairvoyant faculties of Jilani, Qadi Muhammed instructed its readers, reciters and audience to protect their faith and piety, a pattern followed by litterateurs during troubled times in the pre-colonial period.¹³⁵ Similar to what Todorov and Berrong have argued in their discussion about how literary

¹³²A. Werner, “The Languages of Africa”, *Journal of the Royal African Society* 12, 46 (1913), p. 121.

¹³³Concerns about religious and pietistic transgressions were already expressed in the last quarter of the sixteenth century as the *ulema* were aware of the influences that the local rituals and normative practices had on a huge majority of the Mappilas, see Zainuddin Makhdam II, *Fath-al-Muin*, (trans.) Abdul Majeed Faizi. (Calicut: 1575/2012), p. 429.

¹³⁴Wai Chee Dimock, “Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge”, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 122, 5 (2007), pp. 1377–1388.

¹³⁵*Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature* (Massachusetts, 1995), p. 35.

genres originate from social realities, the new genre that Qadi Muhammed introduced in the *Muhyuddinmala* signified certain “constitutive traits” in the cultural and material space of the Mappilas in post-port life in Malabar.¹³⁶ These constitutive traits are explained in a range of mnemonic verses in the text, which recognise changes occurring in urban and rural demography, occupation, economy, piety and ulema authority.¹³⁷

In a similar fashion, with a new script, texture, rendition style, tone and auditory structure, the *Muhyuddinmala* heralded a vernacular Islamic textual and oratory culture in Malabar, in addition to lifting lingual, scriptural, scriptorial and pietistic veils separating the *ulema* and vernacular laity in Malabar. Subsequently, as the writings of Muslim *ulema* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries indicated, the *Muhyuddinmala* influenced the temporal and spatial world of Arabi-Malayalam texts that responded to challenges of the British colonial state. A large corpus of such texts bears testimony to how closely the *mala* literati of the nineteenth century followed the scribal, lingual, tonal, pietistic and scriptorial pattern of the *Muhyuddinmala* in following centuries. The allegorical, analogical, metaphorical and instructive imaginations of these new *mala* literati not only provided the Mappilas with a systematic scriptorial register but also sustainable pietistic awareness in the age of empire. Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, they continuously engaged with the ideas of *tasawuf* (mystic piety), making significant epistemological extensions to the texts dating from the age of *fasad* that gave priority to the ideas of resistance, jurisprudence, theology, *sharia* and martyrdom.

Thus, the *Muhyuddinmala* needs to be viewed as the vernacular continuation of Qadi Muhammed’s own Arabic texts that discussed the tremendous social, political, economical, and moral anxieties present within Malabar’s urban centres in the age of *fasad*. Qadi Muhammed extended his scribal reach to the rural habitus that witnessed different kinds of challenges during this period of transition.¹³⁸ Thus, by transcending the spatial, temporal, lingual and performative limitations of sixteenth-century Arabic texts, the *Muhyuddinmala* emerged as the *terminus post quem* of Arabi-Malayalam literarisation in Malabar. Its existence over four hundred years reflects how it evolved as an embedded life text with tremendous cognitive benefits amongst a major section of the Mappilas, most of whom remained auditory learners as they moved inland. Nowadays, as a ‘living’ pre-colonial text, the *Muhyuddinmala* continues to remind Mappilas of the importance of pietistic self awareness and collective remembrance, the two interconnected acts that shaped medieval Islamic pietistic and communitarian discourses across Islamicate cultural regions in South Asia and beyond.¹³⁹

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¹³⁶For such constitutive traits, see Tzvetan Todorov and Richard M Berrong, “The Origin of Genres”, *New Literary History* 8, 1. Readers and Spectators: Some Views and Reviews (1976), pp. 159–170.

¹³⁷To identify how such changes get reflected in literary genre and lyrical texts, see, *ibid*, pp. 161–163.

¹³⁸P. K. Yasser Arafath, “Malappattukal: Charitram, Rashtreeyam Pradhitham”, *Bodhanam Quarterly Journal* 15, 13 (2014), pp. 67–91.

¹³⁹For such interconnected acts, see, Ahmed Ragab, *Piety and Patienthood in Medieval Islam* (New York, 2018); a number of *mala* texts and their performances continue to play important roles in shaping the moral and religious life of the Mappilas in contemporary Malabar, see A.K. Muneer, “Poetics of Piety: Genre, Self-Fashioning and the Mappila Lifescape”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3 (2015), pp. 1–19.