CHAPTER FOUR

Text and Textuality: The Poetics and Performance of Muhyiddin Mala

As has been indicated several times above, Muhyiddin Mala is the earliest extant Arabi Malayalam work. The mala itself states that it was composed by Qadi Muhammad of Calicut in 782 of the Malayalam Era, that is, 1607 AD, in 155 couplets. Qadi Muhammad (d. 1616) was himself no mean Islamic scholar of his time as he was a member of the famous Qadi family of Calicut and eventually held the post of the Qadi (chief Muslim jurist) of Calicut, a district in modern northern Kerala, during his lifetime. As the title of the mala suggests, it extolls the virtues of the most famous Sufi leader Shaikh Muhyiddin Abdul Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166-7), better known as Gauzul A’zam (The Greatest Help), who, though born in the Persian province of Jilan (Iran) south of the Caspian Sea in 1077/78 AD, lived and died in Baghdad, Iraq.

Arabi Malayalam Literature before Muhyiddin Mala?

We do not have any exact knowledge about Arabi Malayalam works prior to Muhyiddin Mala. This, however, should not prompt one to conclude that Arabi Malayalam literature draws a blank prior to the seventeenth century. No literary culture can come of age overnight. Mappila scholars have discovered a number of anonymous Arabi Malayalam works, including many old poems, which contain no information on their date of composition. Moulavi and Kareem (1978) lists
more than a dozen Arabi Malayalam works of unknown authorship and date. Since we possess scant information on Mappila literary culture before *Muhyiddin Mala*, any conclusions pertaining to the subject can only be speculative at best. Nevertheless, there is scholarly consensus that since Arabi Malayalam has existed as a hybrid language ever since Islam came to Kerala, if not earlier, (and well before the seventeenth century), there is no reason to believe that Arabi Malayalam was lying dormant as a literary language until the appearance of *Muhyiddin Mala*, and that many early Arabi Malayalam works must have been left unpreserved due to the absence of printing (Abu 1970; Moulavi and Kareem 1978). Indeed, subsequent to the adoption of printing by Mappilas in late nineteenth century, several anonymous Arabi Malayalam works have been published and circulated (Moulavi and Kareem 1978).

More significantly, the foremost proof of the existence of Arabi Malayalam literature predating *Muhyiddin Mala* consists in nothing other than the textual fabric of this pioneering work. As many scholars have pointed out, *Muhyiddin Mala*’s highly developed use of Arabi Malayalam as reflected both in its orthography and lexis shows that this *mala* was written at a time when Arabi Malayalam had already established itself as a full-fledged medium of literary production (Abu 1970; Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Vallikkunnu 1999). This also accounts for the fact that scholars often showcase, and rightly so, *Muhyiddin Mala* as the microcosm of the Mappila literary tradition in that they regard it as an ideal text from which to extract the essential characteristics of Arabi Malayalam poetics. Thus, while discussing what he calls the “parallel aesthetics” embodied in Mappila songs, Balakrishnan Vallikkunnu (1999) singles out *Muhyiddin Mala* as the prototype of Mappila songs, which then he parses out in order to lay down the general features of style and diction in Mappila poetry. He writes:
Though Mappila songs constitute a wide-ranging poetic genre, their general character could effectively be determined by means of any single short poem. This (poetic) movement exhibits generalized features to such a great extent! In this essay, it is mainly *Muhyiddin Mala* that serves as a text through which to codify the common characteristics of Mappila songs. (Vallikkunnu 1999, 53).

Accordingly, it is not only the status of *Muhyiddin Mala* as the earliest Arabi Malayalam work with known authorship and date of composition, but also its value as a typical Mappila song written in a highly developed form of Arabi Malayalam poetics coupled with the popularity it enjoys among Mappilas that earns it the place of prominence in Mappila literary culture.

**Contextualizing the TEXT: *Muhyiddin Mala* in Seventeenth-Century Malabar**

It would be important to consider the social, historical context for the composition of *Muhyiddin Mala* in the early seventeenth century at this juncture. Qadi Muhammad ibn Abdul Azeez, the author of *Muhyiddin Mala*, is one of the leading Mappila ulama (“Islamic scholars,” singular “alim”) who lived during the Portuguese occupation of the Malabar coast in the sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries. The title “Qadi” is an Arabic word that refers to an Islamic scholar who is invested with some religious authority and adjudicates matters concerning the religious life of the Muslims under his jurisdiction. That the Mappila Muslims of Malabar, who were controlling trade and commerce of the time, were the worst hit of the first European colonial onslaught on Kerala’s trade dynamics, political stability, and law and order has been well documented by
historians (Dale 1980; More 2011). The Mappila ulama of the period were at the forefront of providing ideological impetus to the anti-colonial struggles that raged during the period of this great social upheaval in the history of Kerala. Thus, the famous *Tuhfatul Mujahidden fi Ba’di Akhbaril Burtughaliyyin* (The Gift to the Holy Warriors in Respect to Some Deeds of the Portuguese) written by Shaikh Zainuddin Makhdoom of Ponnani (d. 1583, also known as Makhdoom, the Junior) in the 1580s, literally exhorted Mappilas to wage a holy war (*jihad*) against the Portuguese colonial forces.

Qadi Muhammad too composed an anti-Portuguese narrative poem in Arabic titled “*Fathul Mubeen*” (The Obvious Victory). This poem in 536 lines thematizes the successful conquest of the Portuguese fort at Chaliam, near Calicut, by the ruler of Calicut Zamorin’s combined Muslim and Nair forces. This poem, which eulogizes the Zamorin on his love and respect for Muslims, his just rule, and his valiance in leading the anti-Portuguese battles, was intended to spread his name and fame among Arabian kings and Muslim rulers across the world:

(I relate) here wondrous tale which describes a battle, strange in its own way.

It has occurred in the quarter of Malabar, the like of which never happened in those countries.

(The war has occurred) between the Zamorin who loves the Muslims, and his enemies, the infidel Frank (the Portuguese).

I have composed a part of the narrative so that the kings and emperors may listen to it. Perhaps they might think of waging war with them when they hear it, or perhaps they might take lesson from it.
And perhaps it may travel over the world and reach Syria and Iraq in particular.

So that they may realize the courage and bravery of the King Zamorin, who is well-known all over the countries.

*(Fathul Mubeen, tr. Muid Khan 1975).*

An interesting pattern of the literary activity accomplished by the ulama and Sufis in Kerala suggests itself here. Qadi Muhammad who wrote the popular devotional performance narrative *Muhyiddin Mala* which became integral to Mappila religious life also produced poetry that lent ideological support to the groundswell of local resistance to colonial domination in Malabar. This is a pattern that we also see in the other ulama who preceded Qadi Muhammad. For example, as well as composing the Sufi poem *Hidayathul Adkiya ila Thwareeqil Awliya* (Guide of the Wise to the Path of the Friends of God), Shaikh Zainuddin Makhdooom, the Senior (d. 1522) wrote an anti-Portuguese battle poem in Arabic titled *Tahrid* (Exhortation). This brings to light the fact that the Mappila ulama of the fifteenth and subsequent centuries present a world view that combines spirituality and social, political activism along lines that do not map on to the binary of religious/secular. This world view has put in a bind those scholars of Keralite Islam who are indifferent to Sufi literature for ideological reasons. While these scholars have no difficulty whatsoever in appreciating a Qadi Muhammad who wrote the anti-Portuguese narrative poem *Fathul Mubeen*, they cannot come to terms with the fact that the self-same person also produced a devotional ballad *Muhyiddin Mala* that, according to these scholars, are essentially “un-Islamic” in that the *mala* commits the cardinal sin of associating partners with God, that is, *shirk* (Mandalamkunnu 2008). Consequently, some of these scholars like Moulavi
and Kareem (1978) try to overcome this dilemma by exclusively focusing on the literary aspects of the *mala* without having to confront the contentious performative dimensions of this text. Others have gone to the extent of unsuccessfully denying Qadi Muhammad the authorship of *Muhyiddin Mala* because, as they reason, a religious scholar of Qadi Muhammad’s stature could not have written as “deviant” a text as this *mala* (Mandalamkunnu 2008). Once again, my interest is not in a theological polemic on the legitimacy of the practices of Mappila literary culture. The point is that such practices do exist, whether one likes it or not, and one needs to confront them squarely. Bringing an ideological foreclosure to the analysis of these practices imprisons any attempt to grasp the literary culture of Mappilas.

As for the context for the composition of *Muhyiddin Mala*, it has been suggested that Qadi Muhammad lived at a time when rivalling Sufi orders were tearing apart the social fabric of Kerala Muslims. He seems to have been deeply worried over what might be called the factional feud in the contemporary Sufi tradition—a tradition that essentially seeks to bring people together rather than drive them away from one another. Thus, while Muslims were politically (more or less) united in their fierce resistance to the Portuguese supremacy in Malabar, they were not immune from internal animosities concerning matters of faith and spiritual practices. Against this background, in writing a devotional ballad in the form of *Muhyiddin Mala*, Qadi Muhammad, himself a chief exponent of the Qadiri Sufi order, not only sought to establish the authenticity and supremacy of the Qadiri Sufi order, but also to unite the internally disintegrated Muslim groups under the umbrella of this famous stream of Sufism (Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Mandalamkunnu 2008). The immediate context for its writing notwithstanding, it is true that *Muhyiddin Mala* soon caught the imagination of Mappilas and spread with an immense
popularity in manuscript form across Malabar in Mappila homes, where it has come to become the part and parcel of domestic devotional life down to the present.

Though Qadi Muhammad has to his credit a number of works in Arabic covering such diverse topics as Islamic jurisprudence, Arabic grammar, and mathematics, his fame as the pioneer, if not the father, of Arabi Malayalam poetry solidly rests upon *Muhyiddin Mala*, the only extant work that we know he has written in Arabi Malayalam. Mappila scholars have argued that *Muhyiddin Mala* predates the classic Malayalam devotional epic *Adhyatma Ramayanam* of Thunchattu Ezhuthacchan, called the father of modern Malayalam, by five years (Abu 1970; Moulavi and Kareem 1978). In this view, Ezhuthacchan’s classic was composed in 1612-13 as against Muhyiddin Mala of 1607. However, since there is no historical basis for fixing an exact date for the former which was probably produced in the sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, the latter’s claim to having preceded the former is difficult to establish. However, this possibility should give us some pause: in descriptions of *malas* under the rubric “syncretism,” scholars like Kunhi (1982) have overemphasized cultural interaction between Muslims and Hindus in Kerala. Also, in this account, syncretism has been understood as a unilateral, one-way process of cultural exchange, that is, a Hindu religious tradition always influencing an Islamic religious tradition. The nail of the question is never reversed so that one could also start enquiring into how and to what extent Arabi Malayalam has contributed to the emergence and development of modern Malayalam.

*“Listen, O the People of the World—He is Muhyiddin (the Reviver of the Faith)”: The Garland Song to Shaikh al-Jilani*
Drawing on the extant body of Islamic literature on the life and example of Shaikh al-Jilani, Qadi Muhammad has fashioned Muhyiddin Mala in 155 couplets that fervently celebrate the virtues and miracles of the revered Sufi saint. The grand style of the poem is mirrored in the virtual parade of sublime epithets and dramatic descriptions running throughout the poem. After the customary invocations, the name of the object of veneration “Shaikh Abdul Qadir Kayalani (Jilani)” is withheld until the thirteenth line when his majesty, excellence and supremacy as the king of the friends of God (sultanul awliya) have already been proclaimed emphatically through an impressive array of descriptive utterances. Then the eulogy resumes but is soon interrupted briefly by comments on the poem and its author:

Like the churning of the cream of milk, this song is sung

Blessed are those who would study this.

Like a savant offering guidance

(Sings) the one by the name of Qadi Muhammad.

The one who was born in the region of Calicut,

The one who fashioned all this stringing together!

The one who gleaned (the material for this mala)

From His (al-Jilani’s) poems and the book “Bahja,” and from “Takmila” as well.

His (al-Jilani’s) virtues are the subject of our song

Listen, O the people of the world—He is Muhyiddin (the Reviver of the Faith).
Qadi Muhammad says that he has based his *mala* on the poems written by al-Jilani himself, (some of these poems are appended to al-Jilani’s work *Futuhul Ghayb* [The Revelations of the Unseen]), *Bahjathul Asrar wa Ma’din al-Anwar* (The Splendor of Secrets and the Mine of Light), a biography of al-Jilani authored by his arch disciple Ali ibn Yusuf Shathanufi (d. 1314), and *Takmila* (Supplement) which refers to a section titled *Takmilathun fi Dikri Waswayahu* (Supplementary Note on His Commandments), copied onto the end of al-Jilani’s work *Futuhul Ghayb* by his son Abdul Razaq (d. 1235).\(^71\) The important point to be born in mind is that Qadi Muhammad, despite his *mala*’s local flavor and its resemblance to both Arabic and Dravidian metrics, links his works to the tradition of Islamic literature that thematizes the exemplary status of Sufi figures. It may be useful to consider the sources of Qadi Muhammad’s *mala* as “prior texts,” to use A. L. Becker’s notion (Becker 1995). Becker says that “all that we know has an agenda, an aggregate of remembered and half-remembered prior texts, which are there to be evoked” and that our utterances are “already languaged”—coming as they do to us in the form of words—and are steeped in history in that “everything one says has a history, and hence is, in part, a quotation. Everything anyone says is also partly new, too.”\(^72\) Prior texts draw on each other, and hence are “intertextual,” paving the way for newer prior texts: an old text, itself a prior text, leads to a new text, which in turn becomes a new prior text in and of itself. The creation of new prior texts takes place when old texts are reformulated and adapted and/or when new ones

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\(^{71}\) See Faizy 2002. 
\(^{72}\) Quoted in Ricci 2011, 245-46. Ricci 2011 draws heavily on Becker’s notion of “prior text” as she explores the process of Islamization in what she calls the “Arabic cosmopolis” of South and Southeast Asia.
are generated through translation or transcreation (Ricci 2011). By mobilizing the prior texts of al-Jilani’s poems and biographic and hagiographic literature on al-Jilani—all written in Arabic—Qadi Muhammad in fact created a new prior text, namely, *Muhyiddin Mala*, which introduced to Mappilas the life and work of al-Jilani in familiar language, genre, and idioms, and which later became the model for subsequent garland songs (*malas*) of the Mappila literary culture.

After a brief digression on the composition and authorship of the *mala*, the sweeping laudatory narrative of *Muhyiddin Mala* picks up momentum and continues its inexorable march till nearly the end of the poem. The poem spares no effort to rhetorically reinforce the invincible status of al-Jilani as the saints’ saint. al-Jilani’s incredible closeness to God and the high esteem with which he is held by God are stressed throughout the poem:

The one who said: *I am the secret of all secrets*

*And my commands are those of God.*

(*MM*, 49-50)

The one who said: *Whosoever calls me, no matter from where,*

*I will answer them well before they close their mouth.*

(*MM*, 105-106)

Even as al-Jilani is presented as the refuge of people in their hour of need, he is also depicted as the horror of those who belittle him:

The one who said: *I am the fire of the one in fury!*
Another rhetorical strategy is to compare al-Jilani with the rest of Sufi figures so as to establish his supremacy over them:

Over the shoulders of all shaikhs (Sufi leaders)

Are my feet, by the grace of God.

(MM, 37-38)

Many of al-Jilani’s miracles find copious expression in the poem. For example:

The one who turned his fingers into a torch

While walking out on a pitch-dark night.

(MM, 207-8)

Towards the end of the poem when praise has reached its apogee, Qadi Muhammad unobtrusively chips in with the information on the date of his mala’s composition and its length, as well as describing his mala as a garland of pearls and rubies. Then, he states the beneficent effects of his mala and exhorts people to recite and sing his song. He also urges those who are looking forward to the prosperity of the hereafter to take oath of allegiance to al-Jilani’s Sufi order called the “Qadiri.” The mala ends with a dozen or so supplicatory lines seeking from God,
inter alia, his forgiveness and the blessings of all Sufi figures, including al-Jilani. The last line reads:

Shower the best of blessings and greetings

Upon your Muhammad, O Allah!

(MM, 309-10)

The main body of the poem in 155 couplets is followed by a special set of prayers called iravu (literally “asking”) in fourteen couplets which seeks from God the help and protection of Shaikh Muhyiddin whose virtues have been thus far valorized in the main text. For example:

As long as we live in this world…

Give us the refuge of the great Muhyiddin, O Allah!

When the angel Azraeel brings us death

Give us the refuge of the strong Muhyiddin, O Allah!

(Iravu to MM, 1-4)

After the iravu, a litany in Arabic is also found that marks the formal end of the textual practice that is Muhyiddin Mala.\footnote{The number of iravus, litanies and dua’s (prayers) varies across editions of Muhyiddin Mala, however.}

There are various editions of this text with minor acts of omission and commission that circulate in the prayer books found in Mappila households and are still available for purchase at
Islamic publishing houses and bookstores, most especially the small makeshift wayside stalls surrounding Sufi shrines in Malabar that sell copies of the Quran, Islamic books, songs, cassette sermons, etc. For example, in some editions of the *mala*, there are 156 couplets instead of 155 which the *mala* itself announces to be the case (See Faizy 2002). In this dissertation, I have relied on the manuscript of *Muhyiddin Mala* discovered from the Arakkal Palace (the residence of the Muslim dynasty of Kannur known as the *Arakkal* Family who ruled during the sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries) in the city of Kannur in northern Kerala. A copy of this manuscript can be found in the Arabi Malayalam Research and Reference Library of the Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar Mappila Kala Akademi (hereafter, Vaidyar Akademi Library) at Kondotty in Malappuram district of Northern Kerala. In this manuscript, the first page carries a brief statement in Arabic on the authorship of the poem, and, in the end, after the litany in Arabic is appended a forty-line supplicatory poem which is not unlike the *iravu* in tone, purpose and content. At the end of this “Arabic *iravu*” is the typical closing seal that formally declares the end of traditional Islamic books in the form of the Arabic expression “thammath” (The End). In some later versions of the *mala*, one further encounters an appendix to the text in what might be considered a second *iravu* in Arabi Malayalam that opens with the phrase “Alifenna manikyam” (The ruby that is *alif*—the same phrase that forms the first part of the title of the third chapter). The authorship of this *iravu* has been ascribed to none other than Qadi Muhammad’s own son Qadi Muhyiddin (d. 1657) who succeeded his father as the Qadi of Calicut (Moulavi and Kareem 1978). I found the *iravu* beginning “Alifenna manikyam” in an edition of *Muhyiddin Mala* called “Agathi manuscript” (dated 1286 AH and 1046 Malayalam Era [1900 AD]), which is available, once again, at Vaidyar Akademi Library. As the manuscript itself attests, the copyist is one Keelafuyya Purayil Abdul Hafeez who is the son of Agathiyil Kuttichodayil Quadiri Haji—
hence the name “Agathi manuscript.” In contrast to the Arakkal manuscript, the Agathi manuscript does not have any description of the *mala* at the beginning. The main body of the *mala* is followed by the iravu “*Muthal*.” Then comes a *du’a* followed by an intercessory prayer to al-Jilani. Then, we see a brief biography of the copyist, and finally a second *iravu* that starts with the phrase “*Alifenna manikyam.*”

I have offered these technical, formal details of *Muhyiddin Mala* to emphasize a point: all the formal, rhetorical conventions in the form of prayers upon prayers perambulating the text of *Muhyiddin Mala* help fix the roots of the *mala* deeper in the time-honored practices of devotional piety in Islam. As a matter of fact, in standard analyses of *Muhyiddin Mala* as a work of literature the *iravus* and prayers have often been trivialized and dismissed in the space of a couple of sentences because, so goes the argument, such prayers are inconsequential for understanding the literary qualities of the *mala*. Thus, Vallikkunnu’s remarks on “*du’a*” (prayers) found in *Muhyiddin Mala* are symptomatic of this dismissive attitude: “Though the aforesaid *du’a* may help invest the *mala* with a religious and devotional aura, it is superfluous when it comes to considering the *mala* as a work of literature” (Vallikkunnu 1999, 54, emphasis added). This is no surprise in that this attitude draws its sustenance from an interpretive frame that subjects *Muhyiddin Mala* to an abstract “literarization” that in turn divorces the text from its social existence as we have already dwelt on. What is lost sight of in this exclusive focus on the “literariness” of the text is the fact that the *mala* is not malleable to such an exercise without its self reflexively performative status being put in jeopardy. Moreover, the *mala* does not exist in isolation from the *iravus* and prayers that accompany it and it is in the relationship between these so-called “appendices” and the main body of the text that *Muhyiddin Mala*, or any *mala* for that matter, assumes its valence and value as a devotional performance narrative.
Also important for our purposes here, that *Muhyiddin Mala* is written in couplet form also reinforces the fact that the text is clearly intended for recitation or singing—a fact that the text itself announces. If one overlooks the performative value of this text, it becomes very easy to underestimate this work as a poem that is full of liturgy-like praise. But it is this liturgy-like praise, and not just the artistic or intellectual challenge this *mala* might afford, that is crucial to understanding the social life of this work that has sustained the Mappila literary formation. *Muhyiddin Mala* literally set a precedent for the *mala* genre in Mappila literary culture. Subsequent popular as well as lesser known *malas* in Arabi Malayalam show the heavy influence of this path-breaking work.

**Muhyiddin Mala and a Parallel/Counter Aesthetics? Some Reflections**

*Muhyiddin Mala*’s importance as a pioneer in the whole tradition of Mappila literature has been celebrated in contemporary “homegrown” scholarship on the subject (Abu 1970; Moulavi and Kareem 1978; C. K. Kareem 1985; Vallikkunnu 1999). Primarily focused on the *mala*’s thematic, stylistic and aesthetic dimensions, these celebratory accounts view this work not only as a landmark in the trajectory of Arabi Malayalam’s development as a Mappila literary language (in that it is *Muhyiddin Mala* that first brought to light the artistic and aesthetic possibilities of Arabi Malayalam, which were then vigorously exploited by subsequent works in this mixed language) but also as a virtual literary “movement” that seeks to put in place an aesthetics that runs parallel to the normative aesthetic practices of the larger literary cultures of Kerala. The
“norm” in this case is provided by the genre or “movement” of *Manipravalam* (the language mixture of Malayalam and Sanskrit) associated with the three Hindu upper caste-divisions (*trivarnikar*).

Let us now briefly track the parallel aesthetics undergirding Mappila literary culture. Balakrishnan Vallikkunnu (1999) has addressed this question with specific reference to *Muhyiddin Mala*. In what seems to be the background to his analysis, Vallikkunnu first draws attention to the emergence and consolidation of *Manipravalam* as an elite language exemplified by its association with the dominant (minority) caste Hindus who controlled the modes of production and enjoyed social and religious upperhand in medieval and early modern Kerala. The language ideology of *Manipravalam* was further underwritten by the status of “scriptural language” accorded to Sanskrit by upper castes. As a language of power, *Manipravalam* soon became a “cosmopolitan vernacular” by attempting to undermine popular regional literary cultures like the so-called *Pattu* genre against which *Manipravalam* sought to define itself. This does not of course mean that *Manipravalam* succeeded in weakening, much less eliminate, popular forms of literary expression. Indeed, these popular genres thrived despite *Manipravalam*’s exclusionary aesthetic practices. Vallikkunnu suggests that it is against such a backdrop that Mappila songs emerged as a “parallel poetic movement” (Vallikkunnu 1999, 46-47). This movement is “parallel” to the extent that while Sanskrit as a sacred language assumes prominence in *Maniparavalam*, Arabic, another scared language highly regarded by Muslims, is brought to define the distinctive character of Arabi Malayalam, (though Arabi Malayalam is heteroglot in lexicon drawing vocabulary from Persian, Urdu, Tamil, etc. apart from Arabic and Bhasha, namely Malayalam, it largely ignores Sanskrit lexis and grammar); that it introduces a novel form of metrics by conjoining Arabic and Dravidian metres, and, once again, rejecting
Sanskrit metrics; and that, in doing so, it not only imitates popular forms of (extra- or even counter-Sanskritic) literary production such as the Pattu genre, but enhances them by supplying new patterns of versification; (it may be recalled that it is the word “pattu” (song) rather than “kavyam” (poem) that is usually used to describe a Mappila work in verse—hence the label “Mappilappattukal,” i.e. Mappila songs).

Vallikkunnu operates on Muhyiddin Mala in order to illustrate his case for the parallel road to aesthetics that Mappila literature ushers in. He notes that out of a total 582 words in the main body of the mala excluding the iravus and prayers, 202 words are Arabic. Thus, lexically the mala shows the predominance of Bhasha (Malayalam). Metrically, though the metre of Muhyiddin Mala bears resemblance to the Dravidian metre kakali, it is best understood as showing the influence of the Arabic metre “khafif,” or to put it slightly differently, it would be prudent to conclude that the metre is influenced by both the Dravidian and Arabic metrics to a varying degree (Vallikkunnu 1999: 54-55). The Malayalam metre kakali popularized by Ezhuthacchan exists as the prototype of several other metres in Malayalam. It consists of two equal lines, wherein a line is constituted by four feet of five matras (morae) or three letters or syllables each. A foot usually contains two long and one short syllables, and of these, the second or third should be a short syllable (Subrahmanyan 1977). As for khafif, in Arabic metrics it refers to the metre made of six feet or paradigm words containing four long, long, short, and long syllables (LLSL) each, and the metre-formula in Arabic paradigm words may be put as follows:

\[ faa’ilaatun mustaf’ilun faa’ilaatun, 2 \text{ times} \] (Stoetzer 1989).
Thus, by way of its heavy reliance on local Dravidian forms of language lexically, grammatically and metrically, Mappila literature is firmly placed in the popular Pattu style as against a heavily Sanskritized Manipravalam, while the use of the Arabic script and lexicon, and the influence of Arabic meter plus the predominance of a religiously-inspired thematics in Arabi Malayalam are taken to underline the Islamic identity of the Mappila literary tradition. It is at the intersection of these two different cultural streams—Dravidian and Arabic-Islamic—that the parallel aesthetics of Mappila literary culture comes to life. Though Muhyiddin Mala has been analyzed by Mappila scholars for its significance as a trendsetting Arabi Malayalam literary work, this has largely been done to the detriment of the equally important task of apprehending the social production of the mala as embodied in its performative status. It is the practices of Mappila literary culture involving the composition, circulation, and recitation, singing, and listening to devotional narratives like this mala that both forged and sustained the Mappila literary formation whose principal vehicle has been Arabi Malayalam. I now want to turn to this central problematic of the chapter in what follows.

The World of Auspicious Power: Piety in Mappila Literary Formation

To begin with, scholars have noticed the phenomenal popularity of Muhyiddin Mala as the exemplary devotional performance ballad among Mappilas, notwithstanding the fact that it is exclusively the work’s “literariness” that has been the cause for celebration in prevalent scholarship. The wider, massive appeal of the mala assumes salience when it comes to appreciating the shared practices and expressions of piety through which the Mappila literary
formation has been constituted, however. Mappila scholars have noted that Mappilas used to recite or sing *Muhyiddin Mala* in their homes daily, most especially at night after *maghrib*, the sunset prayers, although these scholars have barely gone beyond noting this fact (Abu 1970; Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Faizy 2008; Rahman 2008; Randathani 2007). Even when betraying theological discomfort with devotional piety formative of Mappila literary culture, Moulavi and Kareem, in their survey of Mappila literature (1978), acknowledge the performative status of *Muhyiddin Mala* in Mappila devotional life.

Kerala Muslims in almost all households used to sing this (*Muhyiddin Mala*) with devotional fervour daily after the sunset prayers (*maghrib*). When asked about the educational credentials of a Muslim girl during matrimonial proposals, the typical answer was that she had learnt the Quran and *Muhyiddin Mala*! Because Muslims held that *mala* in such high esteem and devotion, it survived generations despite the absence of printing (Moulavi and Kareem 1978, 44).

That *Muhyiddin Mala* has been central to domestic devotional piety in Keralite Islam is further attested to by Mappila women’s great fascination for this *mala*. As Musthafal Faizy (2008) says, “Women used to sing the *mala* in our households after the sunset prayers. They used to sing the *mala* seeking speedy recovery from illnesses, and easy childbirth. ...The *mala* was used to be sung even at weddings in Mappila homes” (68). This does not mean that *mala* recital was a predominantly female activity, however. Faizy (2008) himself notes that expatriate Mappilas in the Gulf countries also used to recite *Muhyiddin Mala* in groups. The point is that this work has caught the popular imagination of Mappila women such that the ability to recite *Muhyiddin Mala* even became the symbolic marker of a Mappila girl’s desirable educational credentials at the
time of her marriage, as indicated by several Mappila scholars, including Moulavi and Kareem above (Abu 1970, Shamsuddin 1978; Randathani 2007; Rahman 2009). Thus, it is through this kind of recitative practices that *Muhyiddin Mala* and other *malas* have survived generations in creating and sustaining a Mappila literary formation.

Different *malas* have been credited with different meritorious and beneficent properties in the Mappila imaginary. For example, drawing on his interview with a local Mappila religious teacher, Hussain Randathani (2007) affirms that *Muhyiddin Mala* is invested with a general type of merit in that it is recited for protection against all types of hardships and calamities. In contrast, *Rifaii Mala* is believed to bring cure for burns and snakebites whereas *Nafeesath Mala* is sung by pregnant women for an easier labour (see chapter six). The configuration of properties of merit due to different *malas* in this way is by no means watertight as any such song could be sung for simply earning funds of merit (*thawab*) and blessing (*baraka*). This takes us to the practice of saint veneration as the prominent form of piety in Mappila literary formation.

At the heart of the practice of *mala* recitation is the veneration of a revered Islamic figure by extolling his or her virtues, which is ultimately taken to be as a righteous and virtuous act worthy of reward (Abu 1970; Faizy 2008). In other words, reciting the *mala* is understood primarily in terms of the generation of religious merit, the activation of the auspicious power imputed to revered Islamic figures, and the anticipation of seamless divine rewards. From this perspective, performing *the mala* is best appreciated as a practice invested with transformative powers: as well as enabling a special relationship to the sacred figure who is the central object of veneration in a *mala* through copious eulogy and invocation of their spiritual presence, performing the *mala* produces in the performer pious dispositions by cultivating in them love and reverence for the extolled. Notably, the *mala* recitation is here understood to be a virtuous act, and hence an *end*,
in and of itself, while it is also regarded to be a means by which the reciter acquires piety in general.

Crucial to this prominent form of piety is the notion of baraka (divine blessings), however. Baraka, often glossed as “blessing,” is a concept that has figured prominently in discussions of popular devotional piety in Islam (Geertz 1968; von Denffer 1976; Katz 2007). An “auspicious power” that affects all that is associated with sacred Islamic persons such as the Prophet 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 (Katz 2007: 82-4). 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 reciters of the mala among Mappilas when asked why they are doing so: kooli kittanum (to earn thawab) and barkatinum (to gain baraka). Here, the reciter does benefit not only from the merit resulting from his pious act of recitation but also from the baraka associated with the figures extolled in the narratives.

Malas circulate in prayer books, popularly called sabeenas, that are still being printed by Muslim presses in Malabar. Though cheaply available at almost every Islamic bookstore across Malabar, sabeenas most especially fill the small makeshift wayside stalls surrounding Sufi shrines in Malabar that sell copies of the Quran, Islamic books, songs, cassette sermons, etc. The sabeena is available in small and large editions (often distinguished by the number of items of devotional narratives and prayers contained in respective editions; for example, 151/313 vaka
mawlid kitab meaning “the prayer book with 151/313 items) and generally contains a wide-ranging repertoires of devotional literature such as the mala, the mawlud,\textsuperscript{74} litanies, hymns, and praise poems in Arabic and Arabi Malayalam that are vital to the religious life of Mappilas.

Several varieties of prayer appear in sabeen: prayer to be said after ritual prayers; prayers connected with various daily chores of life such as eating, dressing, sleeping, and so on; prayers created or approved by, or ascribed to, a specific prophet, Sufi saint, or other revered Islamic figure; and penitential practices known as tawba (literally, “repentance” or “penitence”). Thus, it would be right to call the sabeena an “archive of prayer” and devotion—an “archive” in the double sense of the word as Virginia Reinburg (2012: 4-5) has employed it in her study of the book of hours in late fourteenth to early seventeenth century France: the sabeena is an archive of Mappila devotional life in the past, although it still continues to be relevant to contemporary Mappila religiosity. But it is also an archive of prayer and devotion for Mappilas themselves because it not only preserves materials but also provides them with a rich menu to choose from in the form of prayers and devotional narratives arranged for ready use.

Synecdochically, the sabeena is also called mawlud kitab, an Arabi Malayalam term which means “mawlud book”, where the mawlud is just one among many items that form the book, as well as edu, a Malayalam word that refers to the “leaf” or “page” of a book. Most importantly, the word “sabeena” (sometimes also pronounced safeena) in turn is a corruption of the Persian word shabeena which means “nocturnal” or “taking place at night.”\textsuperscript{75} Since Mappilas used to

\textsuperscript{74} “Mawlud,” in Mappila parlance, is the narratives celebrating the birth and life of the Prophet Muhammad. Compare the Arabic “mawlid”; for details, see chapter two.

\textsuperscript{75} It is easy to mistake sabeena/safeena for the Arabic word “safeena” meaning “ship.” Consequently, O. Abu (1970) traces the origins of sabeena/safeena as the label for Mappila songs to a famous Mappila song Kappappattu (ship song) written by Kunhayin Musliyar. This “ship song” is a philosophical poem which likens the human body and human life to a sailing
(and continue to) recite mawluds, malas, praise poems, and litanies from the prayer book daily at night, the prayer book was metonymically called sabeena/safeena meaning “that which is recited at night” (Kareem 1983: 29-31). This once again illustrates the importance of everyday nightly recital of devotional narratives such as the mala to Mappila religious life, which in turn fostered the Mappila literary formation. More significantly, the whole corpus of Arabi Malayalam poetry had been known as sabeena-/safeena-ppattukal (sabeena songs) well into the latter part of the twentieth century. The current term “Mappilappattukal” (Mappila songs) began to be used to denote the poetic works in Arabi Malayalam about seven or so decades ago (Abu 1970). Until then, Mappilas had been more usually referring to Arabi Malayalam songs as sabeenappattukal. The metonymic relationship between nocturnal recital of devotional narratives by Mappilas and the entire architecture of Mappila literary culture is paradigmatic of the centrality of these devotional performance genres to the making-up of the Mappila literary formation. The sabeena is regarded as the embodiment of baraka and has therefore become a prized family possession in many Mappila households even today. In the past too, Muslims had usually kept copies of the Quran or Muhyyiddin Mala in their homes lest their dwelling places should be bereft of baraka (Moulavi and Kareem 1978). The following anecdote from M. A. Rahman (2008) is telling in many respects:

Before starting to read Malayalam books, I first came to relish the taste of reading from Arabi Malayalam sabeena songs. My mother didn’t know Malayalam. Once in a month, kunhelaya (my younger uncle), clad in bleached white wrap and white shirt with a hand

ship and the voyage in the ship, respectively. According to Abu, the popularity of this poem was so immense that the word safeena (kappal, ship) subsequently came to be used as the generic name for the whole body of Arabi Malayalam poetry. This seems to strain after effect, however. For a rebuttal of Abu’s interpretations of the term sabeenappattukal, see Kareem 1983, 29-31.
kerchief tied around his neck and an Arab cap on his head, would visit us in our home. He would carry on his head a small cane basket full of sabeenas containing songs in Arabi Malayalam! Seating himself on the bulging roots of the jackfruit in our courtyard, kunhelaya would be singing one song or another from the sabeenas. The first letters of my literacy are nothing but Muhyiddin Mala and Pakshippattu76 that I have heard kunhelaya sing in this fashion! The sabeenas, kept in an almirah of my home, would be in my hands on the eve of Fridays. Upon finishing the Quranic chapter Yaseen, we should first sing Muhyiddin Mala, and then Pakshippattu. Me and elder brother Moosa would sing in a competitive spirit!! At the same time, on the other side (of the house), my mother and sisters would be singing Muhyiddin Mala from heart. Listening to them (sing Muhyiddin Mala) repeatedly, we too kept following them until, lo and behold, we also finally committed it to memory!!! (Rahman 2008, 32-33).

A lot of interesting facts shedding light on Mappila literary culture suggest themselves in this anecdote. First, the prominence of sabeena as the mobile repository of Arabi Malayalam poetry is firmly established. Second, the nocturnal recitations of sabeena songs and the special place of and regard for Muhyiddin Mala in the pantheon of Arabi Malayalam literature are emphasized. Third, the dynamic culture of singing Muhyiddin Mala, for example, on a regular basis, participated in by almost all family members in Mappila households, provides us with insight into the sociality of Mappila life past. Finally, and more importantly, the role of sabeena songs in

76 Pakshippattu (bird song) is an Arabi Malayalam song written by Naduthoppil Abdulla of Mogral in Kasaragod district of northern Kerala.
fostering literacy among Mappilas, and in even enabling an alternative literacy movement in Kerala, also stands out in the anecdote.

Now consider another reminiscence by well-known contemporary Mappila short story writer in Malayalam Shihabuddin Poythumkadavu in a note in which he expounds the tremendous influence of *Muhyiddin Mala* on his creative career—in fact, the note is titled “*Muhyiddin Mala Made Me a Writer*”:

> It is through hearing *Uppuma* (paternal grandmother) sing that I picked it (*Muhyiddin Mala*) up in childhood. I would listen, huddling close to *Uppuma*, as she recited the *mala* in her inimitable tune—by lengthening and nasalizing the syllables. Each time I listened, I would lose myself in the sublimity of her sweet voice. Those moments when, perching on *Uppuma*’s lap, I eagerly waited for the *mala* are the cherished experiences of my childhood (Poythumkadavu 2012, 1).

While *Muhyiddin Mala*’s imagery and its greatness as a literary work are the central concern of Poythumkadavu’s note, the above passage at the beginning of his note, nonetheless, illuminates the way *Muhyiddin Mala* largely travelled across generations of Mappilas as well as the broader texture of *mala* recitation in Mappila households in the recent past. What both Rahman and Poythumkadavu describe in their anecdotes is not an isolated social phenomenon, but in fact resonates with the larger Mappila literary formation. As I have noted above, several scholars have called attention to the Mappilas’ wider practices of singing *Muhyiddin Mala* and keeping *sabeenas* in homes for *baraka*, easy use, and so forth. We may also recall that the popularity of *Muhyiddin Mala* among Mappilas was such that there had been a time when a Mappila girl could
pass muster as a potential partner in matrimony once she was armed with the knowledge of 
Muhyiddin Mala.

Muhyiddin Mala and the Mappila Sabeena: Reading and Literacy Practices in Mappila  
Literary Formation

I now want to briefly discuss the different way of “doing literacy” that Arabi Malayalam and its  
dynamic sabeenas have facilitated in the Mappila community—a topic that is no less crucial to  
the Mappila literary formation I have been talking about. It has been noted by Mappila scholars  
that Arabi Malayalam was the main catalyst for Mappila literacy well into the latter half of the  
twentieth century. While Mappilas also learnt Arabic for religious reasons, their literacy in  
Arabic constituted a different kind of literacy from their literacy in Arabi Malayalam. Their  
primarily liturgically-driven literacy in Arabic was mostly about recognizing grapho-phonetic  
correspondences, and so being able to produce the right sounds, when reciting the Quran, for  
example. In contrast, literacy in Arabi Malayalam for Mappilas meant the ability to read and  
write, and so it was Arabi Malayalam that served as the literary language and primary medium of  
communication for Mappilas until Malayalam literacy began to make inroads into the Mappila  
community in the first half of the twentieth century. As scholars have pointed out, almost all  
Mappilas—male and female alike—in Malabar had acquired literacy in Arabi Malayalam as it  
was through this language mixture that elementary instruction in Islamic matters was imparted,  
and the vibrant culture of reading Arabi Malayalam sabeenas prevalent among Mappilas had  
been instrumental in nurturing Mappila literacy in Arabi Malayalam (Abu 1970; Shamsuddin

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1978; Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Abdurrahman 1985; Latheef 1994). In other words, as K. O. Shamsuddin puts it, “When the general literacy rate of Malayali society was less than ten per cent, all Mappilas above the age of ten were literate (in Arabi Malayalam)” (1978, 15).

Notwithstanding its seemingly hyperbolic rhetoric as might be exemplified by the phrase “all Mappilas” without offering any historical evidence, Shamsuddin’s statement still echoes a familiar view shared by many Mappila scholars on widespread Mappila literacy in Arabi Malayalam, historically. Yet, colonial and postcolonial accounts wrote the Mappila out of the purview of “literacy” on the grounds that s/he did not learn standard Malayalam, the language of the state. The figure of the “illiterate” Mappila pervades colonial accounts and this figure dovetails well with the other dominant colonial stereotype of the “fanatic” Mappila (Logan 1981; Fawcett 1901; Innes [1908] 1951). In his comments on Mappila war songs, F. Fawcett echoes the colonial logic of constructing the “illiterate” Mappila thus: “The (Mappila) poets are illiterate men in the sense that they could not even pass a Lower Primary examination in the Government schools” (1901, 505, emphases added). So, on this view, if the Mappila poets whose songs he was destined to examine are illiterate, the illiteracy of ordinary Mappilas can be nothing but doubly unspeakable. Unfortunately, Fawcett could not himself see the worth of the Mappila songs that he set out to study. Similarly, due to their non-literacy in Malayalam, postcolonial census reports also reproduced the majority of Mappilas as “illiterate” (Shamsuddin 1978).

However, the manufacturing of the “illiterate” Mappila through a strained pitting of “Malayalam literacy” against “Arabi Malayalam illiteracy” tells us not so much about the actual illiteracy of Mappilas as about the exclusionary practices implicated in the very construction and deployment of the category of “literate” in official discourses.
This point also reminds us of the larger issue of the ideology of “languagelessness” or “linguistic isolation.” As the US Census Bureau defines it, ‘A household is linguistically isolated if all adults speak a language other than English and none speaks English “very well”’ (Paul Siegel et al 2001, 2-3). Though no human being is “linguistically isolated” by any means, the dominant language/s construct the speakers of “other” languages/dialects as “linguistically isolated,” and therefore “languageless,” and secure through this process of “othering” the very naturalization of the language/s of power. To put it differently, as in any binary oppositions it is through and against the “othered” status and inferiority of the secondary category (e.g., Spanish/Arab Malalam) that the privilege and superiority of the primary category (e.g., English/ Malayalam) are invariably asserted and maintained. The official practice of pathologizing Mappilas’ literacy in Arab Malalam against normative, idealized Malayalam literacy smacks of a language ideology not unlike that of “linguistic isolation” on the US census. What is elided by the normative paradigm of literacy underpinning official discourses, however, is the diverse ways in which literacy is understood and used by different communities in different parts of the world and in a wide range of sites beyond the (government) school (for example, “home literacy”). As is evident from Rahman’s anecdote above, Mappila literacy in Arab Malalam fostered through 

sabeenas was mainly centered around domestic circles, and this social practice of literacy has been crucial to the development of the Mappila literary formation. To understand divergent literacy practices in marginalized communities, it is, therefore, necessary to pay attention to how different people have different ways with words and do literacy differently from the ways literacy is understood and practiced in school (hence,
“schooled literacy”) and by dominant sections of society (Yandell 2014).77 So, if we take into account the sheer diversity of literacy practices across sites and communities in the world, it will not be very difficult to acknowledge the value of Mappila literacy in Arabi Malayalam and subsequently to appreciate it on its own terms rather than decry it as the cause and symptom of Mappila “fanaticism,” “social backwardness,” and “obscurantism” as has often been the case in colonial and later discourses on Mappilas (Innes 1951; Kunhi 1982; Muhammad 1971). It is the reluctance on the part of writers like Muhammad (1971) and Kunhi (1982) to analyze Arabi Malayalam on its own terms that often leads them to complain of Arabi Malayalam’s urge to remain distinct from standard Malayalam, Mappilas’ historical unwillingness to learn the Aryan script,78 the script of modern Malayalam, as reflected in certain religious edicts, and Arabi Malayalam’s alleged resistance to change. Once the temptation to judge Arabi Malayalam against its fidelity to or isolation from modern Malayalam is successfully resisted, the complaints give way to far more fruitful analyses of what Arabi Malayalam is and what it does to its community, instead of how and what it should be according to our “enlightened” assumptions about the world across cultures.

77 I am not accepting the binary “school/home literacies” as unproblematic here as these two sites of literacy practices do not necessarily constitute constant, fixed categories, let alone exist in isolation from each other. See Yandell 2014 for more on this. My point is that in official discourses on Mappila “illiteracy,” different ways and sites of doing literacy among Mappilas, including those involving Arabi Malayalam, are overlooked such that as long as Mappilas did not acquire literacy in standard Malayalam, it would never be possible to write them into “literacy,” their literacy in Arabi Malayalam notwithstanding.

78 The Aryan script (Arya eluttu) is the local name for the variant of the Grantha lipi that forms the basis for the modern Malayalam script. The popularization of the Aray eluttu is attributed to the poet Thunchath Ezhuthachan, author of Adhyatma Ramayanam and contemporary of Qadi Muhammad, author of Muhyiddin Mala. See Mangalam 1988.
Ethnography and the Epistemological Trap: On How Colonial Knowledge Appropriated Mappila Devotional Performance Genres

While the popularity and performative dimensions of *malas* such as *Muhyiddin Mala* have been noticed and acknowledged by Mappila scholars, as we have seen in the foregoing passages, there is little ethnographic information on the subject that will help one grasp the Mappila literary formation better. Mappila scholars I have discussed throughout this dissertation seem to have taken for granted the importance of providing insights into Mappila sociality through something of an ethnography of the performative aspects of devotional narratives frequently encountered in the life of the community. Thus, while all these scholars categorically assert that Mappilas used to nocturnally sing *malas* daily and/or at regular intervals, they have hardly gone beyond this assertion to furnish us with vignettes from Mappila life that allow us to apprehend the practices of Mappila literary culture better. The absence of data, however, does not point to the actual absence of these practices at all. On the contrary, it appears that these practices have been very familiar scenes for these scholars and people at large such that they have not even been thought of as worthy of documentation, though this is a point that we can hardly digest given the prominence of field methods in social science and humanities research projects today.

If we move away from Mappila scholars to focus our attention on colonial accounts of Mappila life, an entirely different picture emerges on the scene: if Mappila scholars are characterized by an attitude of take-it-for-granted towards performative dimensions of devotional
genres in Mappila literary culture, colonial officials display a selective interest in documenting and commenting upon Mappila devotional performance literature (Logan 1981; Fawcett 1901; Innes 1951). That is, though we have seen from the remarks made by Mappila scholars that performance of devotional genres actually infuses and suffuses everyday Mappila life, colonial narratives choose to discuss these performance genres insomuch as doing so helps reinforce the colonial construct of the “fanatic” Mappila. The classic example to illustrate this point is William Logan (d. 1914), the Collector of Malabar, and later, the District Magistrate of Malabar. In an attempt to write Malabar into History in service of British colonial administration in the region, Logan wrote a master narrative titled *Malabar*, better known as *Malabar Manual*, in two volumes, which was first published in 1887.79 While discussing the British supremacy in Malabar, Logan’s account is virtually bursting with the figure of the “fanatic” Mappila. To buttress this figure, Logan also gives us glimpses into Mappilas’ performance of devotional narratives in connection with the so-called Mappila outrages in British Malabar. Here the point is not so much about the importance of such performances as about the symptoms of Mappila “fanaticism” which, to Logan’s mind, they are indicative of. The following extract from Logan’s *Malabar* is instructive, the context being Logan’s discussion of the Collector of Malabar H. V. Conolly’s murder by a group of Mappilas in 1855. As he narrates the “facts of this most tragic and melancholy occurrence,” Logan gives us details of the actions carried out by Conolly’s murderers prior to their operation (1981 v. i, 643):

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79 Logan’s *Malabar*, reprinted in 1906 and 1951, was the single most influential administrative treatise to be brought out during the period of British rule in Malabar starting in 1792. His monumental report came to serve as the presiding deity of scholarship on Malabar, which in turn has spawned subsequent historical accounts of the region that have been largely uncritical.
…From the [Mambram] shrine they proceeded to Vettattpudiangadi, where they stayed for a short time. On the 29th and 30th [of August 1855] they visited certain shrines of local reputation lying within easy distance of that station. After this they roamed about the country till the 9th September, on which date they were harboured by one Malakal Mammu, whose house was situated three-quarters of a mile due east of Mr. Conolly’s residence on West Hill, now occupied by the European detachment at Calicut. On the 10th there was a nercha [feast when a vow is made] in Mammu’s house, at which these assassins were present. The ceremony consisted in the recital of a song called Moidin Mala Pattu, and their war-knife was passed through the smoke of the incense burnt on the occasion.

Thus prepared, the ruffians left Mammu’s house on the evening of 11th and noiselessly entered Mr. Conolly’s residence… (Logan 1981 v. i, 644).

Logan’s main interest in narrating the “ritual preparations” made by Conolly’s murderers before they committed their act is to add force to the image of the “fanatic” Mappila that he has already constructed. However, filtering through the interstices of Logan’s narrative are insights into the performative aspects of devotional genres such as the mala that enrich, and are enriched by, the thick texture of Mappila sociality. Shrine visitation and saint veneration as salient forms of piety in Mappila social life are brought into centerstage here. What is problematic about colonial portraits of Mappila devotional literature, nonetheless, is its exclusive focus on performance of this literature in connection with Mappila militancy, thereby completely ignoring the other various contexts of performance that punctuate the daily grind of life for Mappilas far from the heroism of war and martyrdom. Stephen Dale (1980) also limits his sporadic discussion of
Mappila devotional literature to his analysis of “religious militancy” among Mappilas during the centuries-long Mappila uprisings directed against both European forces and dominant Hindu castes in Malabar from the Portuguese period until the Mappila Rebellion of 1921-22.

While colonial officials have enthusiastically recorded the details of the mawlud and mala recitation preceding the “Moplah outrages,” the performative value of these very same genres outside the context of violence has hardly attracted them. As a result, we are left with next to nothing in terms of historical accounts or ethnographic vignettes about performance of Mappila devotional narratives in contexts, mundane or otherwise, of daily life in the past. This absence of data on the full spectrum of the contexts for the performance of these narratives does not detract from their multi-contextual existence historically. Even the vignette found in Logan’s Malabar quoted above is evidence enough to suggest the popularity and wide circulation of this performance literature among the Mappila community. For, malas, like mawluds, were not essentially tailor-made for the so-called ritualized preparation on part of Mappilas for jihad (holy war) in the first place, as the colonial accounts and others in the same vein would have us believe. They are genres constitutive of devotional piety in Mappila life as should be clear from the practice of singing malas in Mappila households as detailed above. They hold for Mappilas a primarily meritorious value permeating all aspects of life—and this helps us understand why Mappilas recited malas or other devotional narratives before they took on a life-and-death battle with colonial forces. More importantly, as we have already seen, these genres themselves proclaim their recitative use for meritorious value in unequivocal terms. In so doing, they foreground their performative nature and transformative powers. Similarly, there is no reason to believe that the mala as well mawlud became popular overnight as the “Moplah outrages” broke out during the colonial period. These traditions, in all likelihood, must have evolved over time.
and become intertwined with Mappila social life well before the European onslaught on Malabar since the sixteenth century by which time Mappilas had already become a well-entrenched community with a profound sense of Islamic identity in Malabar. Commenting on the name “Mappila” in 1800, the British colonial traveler Francis Buchanan notes: “…among themselves, they (the Mappilas) acknowledge no other name than that of Mussulmans” (1807, 102-103).

With such sense of an Islamic identity, Mappilas could not have ignored the devotional narratives, (explicitly intended for recitation and singing), that were so central to the model of Islamic piety they sought to strive for—a model of piety in which saint veneration figures prominently. It is this kind of deep entanglement between devotional performance narratives and Mappila social life that once made Muhyiddin Mala and sabeenas the chief catalyst for Mappila literacy and education.\(^{80}\)

**Conclusion**

Instead of concluding this chapter by recapitulating my arguments so far, I want to end by a few snippets of thought on Arabi Malayalam and its literary culture in contemporary times. Today, it is no longer possible to talk of Arabi Malayalam and a Mappila literary formation in terms discussed in this dissertation. Arabi Malayalam, having discharged its historical functions, is now a spent force as the literary language of the Mappila Muslims of Kerala. With considerable advancement in general, public education at their disposal, all Mappilas today are literate in

\(^{80}\) Incidentally, combining history with ethnography, Virginia Reinburg (2012) demonstrates *inter alia* how the book of hours was used not only to guide prayer but also to teach literacy in late medieval and early modern France.
Malayalam and so mainly conduct their affairs in that language. But this is not to suggest that the Mappila literary formation is no longer extant, and so this is more a historical reconstruction. While Mappilas’ recent “formal” entry into “literacy” has all but eroded Arabi Malayalam as the once vibrant literary language of Mappilas, now confining it to the elementary textbooks in madrasas for basic religious instruction, its performance genres such as the mala, and its sabeenas are very much alive and continue to punctuate Mappila everyday life even these days. Since Arabi Malayalam texts continue to have salience, it would be wrong to conclude that the Mappila literary formation is now purely historical. In fact, it is a formation whose traces are still present, though it has been under pressure by the “reformist” Muslim forces since the early twentieth century. In other words, the popularity and continuing circulation of Arabi Malayalam malas and other devotional genres suggest that this literary formation continues, though obviously in an altered context (see chapters five and six where I try to give ethnographic anchorage to this point).

It is true that performance of malas among Mappilas has witnessed a decline in recent times. This has prompted some scholars like Abu (1970) to argue that such decline is the result of the successful propaganda unleashed by Islamic “reformist” activists in Kerala since the early decades of the twentieth century, who challenged, and continue to challenge, the religious legitimacy of contentious practices such as saint veneration. On this view, mala recitation is increasingly falling into disrepute under the weight of Islamic “reformism” in present Kerala.

I am less persuaded by this argument—hence two short comments on this problem. First, while it is possible to see some negative impact of reformist propaganda on Mappila devotional practices such as recital of the mala, it would be a mistake to buy into this narrative (that mainly attributes contemporary decline in such practices to “reformist” activism) in that the decline is
not so much due to the success of this propaganda as to other larger social factors. That is, this so-called decline is not an exclusive feature of popular devotional practices such as saint veneration. If anything, such a pattern of decline can be perceived in other areas of Islamic religiosity such as rites of worship including ritual prayers and the Quran recitation which are far from contentious. So how do we account for this alleged general decline in religious practices today? The following passage by Musthafal Faizy provides one way out:

It is true to a certain extent that the *mala* is not in wide circulation these days as it used to be in the past. At the same time, it is not right to contend that this situation emerged as the Mappila community started hating the *mala* following the interventions of *Mujahids* (a self-styled Muslim “reformist” group in the *salafi* tradition in Kerala known as Kerala Nadwathul Mujahideen; see footnotes 41 and 127) against it. Instead, this is part of the changes that occurred with time. We can notice this decline in the habit of the Quran recitation too. Today, Quran recitation does not take place in Muslim households between the sunset and night prayers (*maghrib* and *isha’*) as actively as it used to in olden times. In the changed circumstances, everybody’s time has been divided (between different things). The believers are compelled to find time to address all unprecedented issues—personal, familial, and social. Consequently, there is not much time available (to people) for carrying out *ibadat* (rite of worship). It is only natural that this paucity (of time) should adversely affect the habits of reciting these sacred texts (Faizy 2008, 69).

Note that in the words of Mappilas like Faizy, *mala* recital is no less a rite of worship than ritual prayers, though one is not the same as the other in the degree of divine obligation that drives
these rites. Also, the whole complex of acts of worship suffers from what Faizy describes as worldly distractions.

Second, and all the more important, contemporary Mappilas have not weaned themselves away from devotional practices such as the recitation of the mala that have been crucial to the constitution of the Mappila literary formation examined in this chapter. Arabi Malayalam sabeenas are still central to Islamic devotional piety in Mappila life over a decade into the twenty first century. Not only these sabeenas are found in Mappila households today, they still come to life on various occasions in daily life both through individual and collective (especially in the case of the mawlud) performances. The constitutive role of devotional performance genres such as the mawlud and mala in the self-fashioning of contemporary Mappilas is something that can be demonstrated in ethnographic detail. I turn to this important task in the next two chapters by analyzing, with the help of field notes, the mawlud and mala as devotional practices central to the Mappila lifescape even today.

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81 It is true that in the recent past Mappila devotional performance narratives such as Muhyiddin Mala have been appropriated for popular entertainment, online and offline—in public festivities, musical concerts, commercial recordings, even Malayalam films—thereby growing beyond their original religious function tied to Islamic devotional piety. A text, thus, may have multiple contexts—primary as well as secondary—for its performance. A primarily ritual text, for example, Muhyiddin Mala, can be used in entertainment, practice, or pedagogy (Cf. Sherzer 1983, 118; Bauman and Briggs 1990, 75-76). Also, see the conclusion to this study, for a brief discussion of a related point.