CHAPTER FIVE

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

In my introduction to this dissertation as well as in the first chapter I noted that prevalent scholarship on Mappila Muslims of Kerala has either given short shrift to, or painted in broad brushstrokes, the impressive literary culture of the Mappilas despite its enormous historic/al and socio-cultural value.\(^{82}\) I also said that even the tiny array of scholarly works, mostly by Malayali scholars, that seeks to treat of Mappila literature has largely approached the subject from a provincialized “literary” vantage point, thereby reducing the whole of Mappila narratives to mere aesthetic artifacts having no bearing upon the lives of Mappilas. I called this dominant paradigm of doing Mappila literature “literarization”—that is, fetishizing the “literariness” of text by privileging its formal, stylistic, and aesthetic features over its social tone and life. This view assumes text to be a domain of symbols separable from a domain of practice and disregards the social production of text which cannot be abstracted out from the materialities giving shape to it (Bakhtin 1981).\(^{83}\)

\(^{82}\) I employ the term “literary culture,” to recall a point made at the beginning of the dissertation, not just descriptively but, more importantly, analytically as well. A literary culture is constituted by social practices of people composing, singing, reciting, reading, copying, printing, and circulating texts (Pollock 2000).

\(^{83}\) Other reductionist lenses related to “literarization” through which Mappila literature has been hitherto examined are “folklorization” and “cultural syncretism.” While syncretism is well known as a rubric of multidisciplinary use to characterize and examine cultural and religious exchange, interaction, and mixture, I want to briefly emphasize the two different senses in which I have deployed the term “folklorization”. First, folklorization as the act of reducing to a fixed, stable entity of folklore the literary cultures that straddle the conventional binaries of the written and the oral, the literary and the traditional. Second, drawing on Saba Mahmood 2005, 48-53, folklorization as understanding literary cultures as a form of mere entertainment or as a means to simply express, rather than form, one’s identity, religious or otherwise.
In a clear departure from this normative understanding of Mappila literary culture which I find analytically shallow and reductive, this chapter and the next seek to urge that Mappila devotional genres such as the mawlud and mala be best appreciated as transformative practices that produce, rather than merely express, Mappila selfhood and subjectivity. While the mawlud refers to laudatory poetry interspersed with prose narratives written in Arabic that celebrates the birth and life of the Prophet Muhammad, and also of significant Islamic personalities, the mala designates a devotional poem in Arabi Malayalam extolling the virtues of important Islamic figures, including the Prophet Muhammad, but most commonly the Sufis, and historic Muslim events. In highlighting the mutual co-production of communities and narratives, I will bring to light in some ethnographic detail the constitutive role of genre in what I call the self-fashioning of Mappila Muslims of Kerala. Before embarking on the task of thickening the description of the sociality of Mappilas as both expressed and forged by devotional performance genres which in turn are best construed as arts of the self, it is useful to begin with a brief discussion of the theoretical warp and woof upon which my analysis is woven.

**Genres of the Self**

When I posit that Mappila devotional genres such as the mawlud and mala are generative—not merely expressive/symbolic—of ethical selfhood among Mappilas who inhabit the devotional performative world of these genres, I do enfold as well as uphold a set of assumptions about literary genre, and performance/embodiment and self-fashioning, not least of ethical consequence, that throw into question the dominant interpretive grid of what I have termed “literarization” above which has so far informed Mappila literary studies. I view text or genre as
practice rather than as idea and consequently I seek to understand text/genre taking on board its formative relation to context (Hanks 1989; Freeman 2003). This notion helps me to conceptualize text or genre not as merely expressive of a *pre-existing* surround or locus, but as equally constitutive of contexts and cultural formations.

The terms “self-fashioning” and “ethical formation” that stand out in my analysis are evidently inspired by the highly influential work of Michel Foucault on power/knowledge, subjectivity and technologies of the self, and ethics. After Foucault, we no longer apprehend power as a merely repressive and restrictive external force but as an enabling, internal relationship—that is, power as potentiality, the capacity to enact something in relation to other persons, things, institutions, and so on (Asad 2006). As Colin Gordon rightly notes, crucial to Foucault’s analytics of power are his two ideas of the “*productivity of power*” and the “*constitution of subjectivity through power relations*” where power relations involve not just repression and limitation but also “the intention to teach, to mold conduct, to instill forms of self-awareness and identities” (Gordon 2000, xix; original emphasis).

In his investigation into subject formation—the way a human being “turns him- or herself into a subject” (Foucault, *The Subject and Power* 2003, 126)—Foucault draws our attention to what he calls “technologies of the self”:

(Technologies that) “permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct,

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84 Stephen Greenblatt (1980) also employs the term “self-fashioning” while examining an increased self-consciousness in sixteenth-century England about the forming of human identity as a “manipulable, artful process.” Noting the relevant connotations of the verb “fashion,” Greenblatt writes that “As a term for the action or process of making, for particular features or appearance, for a distinct style or pattern, the word had been long in use, but it is in the sixteenth century that *fashion* seems to come into wide currency as a way of designating the forming of a self.” (Greenblatt 1980, 1-2).
and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault 2003, 146).

In other words, these technologies are the intellectual and practical procedures, instruments and tools suggested or prescribed to human beings in order for them to mold and govern their ways of being human. As Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (2003) have pointed out, in Foucault’s scheme of things “ethics” is understood in terms of the techniques, practices and procedures through which a subject works upon herself, thereby transforming herself into the willing subjects of a certain moral discourse. In fashioning her own self, the subject of Foucault’s analysis is acting within a field of constraints, however—that is, he is not talking about a free, autonomous subject who crafts her/-self independently (of other persons, things, institutions, and so on). Instead, the subject for Foucault is constituted within the bounds of what he describes as “modes of subjectivation”—the ways in which the “individual establishes his relationship to the rule and recognizes himself as obligated to put it into practice” (Foucault 1985, 27). In this view, human beings are enjoined or summoned to recognize their moral obligations through a

85 “Mode of subjectivation” is the second component of Foucault’s fourfold scheme of ethics (or the ethical fourfold to use Paul Rabinow 1997, xxvii), the first being “ethical substance,” third “ethical work,” and the fourth “telos.” The ethical substance refers to “the way in which the individual has to constitute this or that part of himself as the prime material of his moral conduct,” for example, the human body; ethical work is the work that “one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one’s conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behavior”—in short, the various techniques of the self such as sexual austerity and renunciation of pleasures, to cite Foucault’s examples; and the telos of the ethical subject is the establishment of a “moral conduct that commits an individual…to a certain mode of being…characteristic of the ethical subject”. Thus for Foucault, one’s relation to oneself—i.e., self-formation as an “ethical subject”—is “a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal.” This process demands that the individual “act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself.” Foucault 1985, 26-28.
system of order such as divine law or rational rule. Note that Foucault’s idea of modes of subjectivation characteristic of ethical formation points up the relations of domination and structures of authority through which a subject transforms herself in order to realize a teleological model within a particular life world.\(^{86}\) As there are different modes of subjectivation, of establishing one’s relations to oneself through obedience to a moral code, Foucault’s analysis of ethical formation urges that we examine the specific morphology—the contours and character—of ethical practices in order to understand the kind of ethical subject fashioned through such practices. These practices are best understood as techniques or arts of existence that include embodied acts and ways of one’s daily conduct in life. Significantly, the idea of techniques of the self emphasizes the ethical work these techniques perform in creating subjectivity rather than the signification they carry for their practitioners.

Foucault’s conception of ethical formation in turn takes its inspiration from a larger, much older tradition of ethics that we call Aristotelian. For Aristotle, moral virtues are acquired through habituation—“as a result of habit” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 23).\(^{87}\) This involves a coordination of outward behaviours, including bodily acts, and inward dispositions through the repeated performance of acts that contain those specific virtues. Key to the conceptual architecture of Aristotelian moral thinking that has influenced both Christian and Islamic

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\(^{86}\) The paradox of subjectivation in Foucault’s conception of the subject is revealing: it is through *subjection* that a *subject* is formed—in other words, the capacity for action is made possible and produced through specific relations of subordination. The norms that subject one are also the conditions by which one becomes an “I.” Thus, one is not just *subjected to* power, but also *subjectivated* (made a subject) *by* power.

\(^{87}\) Commenting on Aristotle’s notion of the efficacy of “habit” in her study of the common prayer in early modern England, Ramie Targoff notes that ‘Hamlet’s advice to Gertrude—“assume a virtue if you have it not”—originates from the behaviorist philosophy outlined in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which posits a causal link between ethics (*ethike*) and habit (*ethos*).’ (Targoff 2001, 4).
tradition is the notion of *habitus*—a concept first introduced into the social sciences by Marcel Mauss (1979) and popularized by Pierre Bourdieu (1977). *Habitus* is about ethical formation made possible by a certain pedagogical process through which a moral disposition is acquired. This process entails the acquisition of a virtue by a person through consistent physical exertion, assiduous practice, and discipline such that this virtue becomes permanently enmeshed and sedimented in the person’s character. Drawing on Mauss’s formulation of *habitus* in his essay “Body Techniques,” cultural anthropologist Talal Asad employs *habitus* to refer to the “predisposition of the body,” to its “traditional sensibilities”—to “that aspect of a tradition in which specific virtues are defined and an attempt is made to cultivate and enact them” (Asad 2006, 289; see also Asad 1993, 75-76 and Asad 2003, 251-52). One can see an echo of this principle in the fourteenth century Muslim thinker Ibn Khaldun’s (d. 1406) notion of “*malaka*”. As Ibn Khaldun puts it, “A (*malaka*) is a firmly rooted quality acquired by doing a certain action and repeating it time after time, until the form of (that action) is firmly fixed. A (*malaka*) corresponds to the original (action after which it was formed)” (Khaldun 1958, 346). The notion of *habitus*, therefore, brings to relief the constitutive role of conscious, repeated performance of actions—virtuous or otherwise—in forging and augmenting subjectivities.

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88 In considering the classical Islamic tradition of *adab* as the foundation of the soul or personality of the human being as a whole, Ira Lapidus (1984) explores the Khaḍḍunian idea of *malaka/habitus* along with the relevant work of classical Muslim scholars Miskawaih (d. 1030) and al-Ghazzali (d. 1111). *Adab* in this tradition means correct knowledge and behavior in the entire process by which an individual is trained, guided, and fashioned into a good Muslim.

89 While illuminating the conception of *salat* (ritual prayer) guiding the Egyptian women’s mosque movement, Saba Mahmood also draws on the Aristotelian formulation of *habitus*, which means “an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person” (Mahmood 2005, 136). For Mahmood’s critique of Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* for its inherent socioeconomic determinism and inattention to the pedagogical process entailed in *habitus*-formation, see Mahmood 2005, 138-139.
There is, of course, a fascinating body of contemporary scholarship that explores aspects of ethical self-formation enabled through embodied and ensouled practices, (where the material body forms the site of human action and experience, and the living human body becomes an integrated whole having “developable means” for accomplishing a range of human goals, see Asad 1993, 76 and also Asad 2001), along lines of inquiry inspired and opened up by Aristotelian moral thought. Of this, I wish to single out the work of two socio-cultural anthropologists Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006) who have deepened and enriched our understanding of the constitutive relationship between bodily acts and ethical self-improvement central to contemporary forms of Muslim religiosity. In her ethnography of the elaborate program of self-cultivation practiced by the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood focuses on the bodily, technical capacities demanded by self-formation and on the particular conception of the body, personhood, and politics these capacities presuppose, engender, and construct. Likewise, Charles Hirschkind analyses at ethnographic length the practice of ethical cassette sermon listening among men associated with the Islamic Revival in contemporary Egypt as part of a practical tradition for the formation of a pious sensorium—a sensorium that has developed the somatic and affective potentialities that enable virtuous dispositions.

Both these ethnographies explore at length practices such as ritual prayer, veiling, and cassette sermon audition directed at the cultivation of Islamic conduct in which painful emotions—for instance, virtuous fear (taqwa)—are integral to the practice of ethical formation. Notably, as their ethnographic vignettes underscore, these emotions are regarded not as mere stimuli for action but formative of action itself. These emotions are also understood to be an indispensable means for the cultivation of virtues and pious dispositions required to become a
devout Muslim. Moreover, in this economy of ethical-formation, ritual performance serves both as a means and as an end, and exteriority is considered to be a means to interiority, in stark contrast to the modern, secular notion of the separation between public exteriority and private interiority (see Mahmood 2005, 131-139).

I find particularly handy the conceptual insights that Mahmood and Hirschkind provide into the constitutive relationship between (ritual) performance and self-cultivation for examining the texture of ethical self-fashioning engendered by the performative dimensions of the literary culture of Mappila Muslims of Kerala —that is, for exploring the ways in which recitation of devotional performance genres such as the mawlud and mala by Mappilas, as I argue in the rest of this dissertation, not only reflects but also forges the kinds of pious dispositions and virtuous affects required of the performers to become good Muslims. While I exploit their analytics to the full, my work also departs from theirs in certain respects which I want to briefly mention here. First, whereas both Mahmood and Hirschkind focus on the practices of cultivating Islamic conduct in which painful emotions such as fear and remorse are regarded as central to the practice of moral discrimination, it is love, joy, and reverence for the extolled such as the Prophet Muhammad and Sufi figures—pleasant emotions if you will—that are integral to the practice of ethical formation enabled by Mappila devotional narratives with which I am concerned in this study. Note that my point is not that the endurance of pain is inconsequential in a program of self-cultivation for Mappila Muslims. Instead, I simply want to say that it is explicitly the virtue of love and similar emotions that one feels and experiences for the objects of veneration in devotional narratives that are both expressed and enacted in pious recitative practices. What I take from Mahmood and Hirschkind is the insight permeating their work which, when translated into the context of my problematic, means that the practice of reciting
devotional narratives by Mappilas does not issue from an *always already* love that exists in the reciters for the venerated figures of these narratives; it is also *through* such practice that virtuous love and similar emotions are created and bodied forth, as I shall explain shortly. Second, while both Mahmood and Hirschkind have analyzed aspects of the program of ethical self-fashioning associated with the Islamic Revival which is largely dismissive of Sufi devotional practices such as the *mawlid*, in probing the morphology of Mappila self-fashioning in this work I focus my attention on what I call the transformative practices made possible by overtly Sufi-inspired devotional narratives that live a controversial existence within the Islamic tradition.\(^90\) Finally, (and this applies to Hirschkind), while acknowledging the development and formation of the virtues facilitated by sermon audition, Hirschkind, however, wants to theorize this practice at the level of the somatic more than the programmatic—that is, as he puts it, the practice of sermon audition enables “less honed dispositions…than the somatic and affective potentialities” that sustain such dispositions (Hirschkind 2006, 82). In contrast, insomuch as I deal with the practice of reciting devotional narratives among Muslims of Malabar, I am mainly concerned with a disciplinary program geared to the task of developing and forming virtues, as is the case with Quranic recitation, for example—although the *mawlid* and *mala* performance can also be, and indeed is, an avenue for the practice of ethical listening that is best explored in terms of its somatics rather than its programatics, as Hirschkind has rightly argued. Even as my concerns in this study diverge from those of Mahmood’s and Hirschkind’s at the level of thematics, the

\(^90\) This should not be taken to mean that Islamic Revival movements such as the one studied by Mahmood and Hirschkind do not show any influence of Sufism. Indeed, as Hirschkind (2006, 102) notes, the contemporary *da’wa* movement in Egypt has incorporated the Sufi-inspired tradition of “linking the realization of ethical being with the resonant body,” while rejecting many aspects of Islamic mysticism.
analytic labor of my study largely owes it to their illuminating work on questions of embodiment/ensoulment and ethical formation.

In what follows I analyze, through brief ethnographic portrayal, the ritual performance of devotional narratives by contemporary Mappila Muslims of Malabar and how this performance tradition maps onto a program of self-cultivation that is central to the performers’ conception of being a pious Muslim. In so doing, I want to highlight the constitutive role of Mappila literary culture—devotional literary genres in particular—in the formation of an ethical selfhood among Mappilas. I also want to urge that the devotional performance narratives such as the ones I am presently concerned with should be apprehended and appreciated not through the lens of an abstract “literarization” which reduces these narratives to mere cultural artifacts having no bearing upon one’s daily conduct in life—a lens that also relegates these narratives to a putative realm of private, individual consumption. Instead—and here I stress—they should be explored with adequate attention to their social production and performative dimensions which enable a particular life world where the literary is reducible neither to the performative nor to the aesthetic. That is to say, a proper understanding of devotional performance genres of Mappila literary culture also requires a profound sensitivity on our part to the ethical work they perform on Mappila selves, to the accomplishment of which the poetics of these narratives is no less crucial.91

91 It should now be clear that my point is not to privilege the ethical performance of Mappila devotional genres at the expense of their aesthetic, stylistic dimensions. My point is simply this: to understand the true “literariness” of Mappila devotional genres, one also needs to take serious note of the performative value of these genres which is in turn facilitated and sustained by the aesthetic and stylistic features of these genres. The dominant tendency in Mappila literary studies is to valorize the formal stylistics of texts at the cost of their social life.
My specific argument is that Mappila devotional performance genres like the *mawlud* and *mala* are best understood as transformative practices in which the reciter-performer not only enacts a special relationship with the object of veneration in these genres—the Prophet, Sufis, etc.—but also develops and cultivates pious dispositions such as the virtuous love and reverence for the extolled. While the *mawlud* is usually recited collectively rather than individually on various occasions like the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, of death anniversaries of Sufi figures, housewarming, wake, etc., the *mala* is more often than not sung individually seeking fulfilment of certain needs or desires such as protection against maladies, or for its general meritorious value. However, to flesh out my argument, I focus my attention on the performative aspects of the *mawlud* in this chapter and on the *mala* in the next, although my analysis will be no less consequential for an understanding of devotional performance narratives across languages and cultures. The *mawlud*, contra the *mala*, is the most “untouchable,” as it were, of topics in Mappila literary/cultural studies and therefore the most deserving of critical attention. This is not to say that the *mala* genre has been extensively, if not exhaustively, studied. In fact, the performative dimensions of the *mala* have received scant scholarly attention—and this is an issue I try to address in this dissertation (see chapters three, four and six in particular). Yet, the *mala* as a popular type of Mappila songs has been widely celebrated in contemporary Mappila scholarship, although this celebration has largely remained blind to the social production of the genre (Cf. Vallikkunnu 1999, 2008). In contrast, the *mawlud* has received a raw deal, as it were—there is not even an adequate acknowledgment, let alone celebration, of this genre in mainstream writing on Mappila culture (Cf. Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Kunhi 1982).
My ethnographic observations on which I pivot my analysis of the constitutive relationship between devotional narratives and ethical formation come out of a number of recitations of the mawlud and mala that I have attended and participated in over a period of five years in various parts of Malappuram district in south Malabar of Kerala. This apart, at a more personal level, I have found myself part of this tradition of Islamic devotionalism from a very early age. In fact, I grew up in a family and community of Mappilas in South Malabar whose daily life was punctuated by recitations of devotional narratives such as the mawlud and mala. I have grown up hearing my own father, a wage earner, singing the mala and reciting the mawlud and other devotional poems at the fall of night almost every day without fail—a tradition he keeps up to this day. I have also heard my mother, who is mostly consigned to household tasks, singing devotional songs in Arabic and Arabi Malayalam. Most often, they both would sing from the prayer manual called sabeena, and on occasions they would simply chant from memory. And the same story can be told of many Mappila households not only in my hometown but also elsewhere. The result is inevitable: nested within the interstices of my ethnographic thick descriptions are traces of my long personal entanglement and enmeshment in Mappila devotional life that has been formative of my own relation with myself—my ethical selfhood if you will. The lines separating participant-observer from informant collapse as I enter into the spirit of the mawluds and malas I have professionally observed as an ethnographer and come to speak the same language as my informants’. Therefore, if my own voice, as distinct from my scholarly

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92 Needless to say, in the interests of confidentiality, I have changed all the personal names referring to institutions, mawlud attendees, and mala reciters that figure in this chapter and the next.
voice, is also audible in the din of my ethnographic minutia, that is because I have no ethnographic “other” to confront in the first place—in studying and writing about Mappilas and their devotional performance narratives, I have also studied and written about myself as a Mappila. I know this situation has its own costs but I do not think that intellectual labour should necessarily be quarantined from life, that if one practises, as it were, what one studies, then one cannot study it “critically.”

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

Be that as it may, what piqued my interest the most and then pitchforked me into this study was the sheer absence of any substantive discussion on the devotional, performative aspects of Mappila literary culture in mainstream scholarship on Mappila literature, despite the centrality of the performance genres to the fashioning of devotional piety among Mappilas. I found that most, if not all, scholars of Mappila literature betray profound discomfort with the performative dimensions of Mappila literary culture. A main reason for this discomfort, as I discovered, owes to a particular religiously-inspired antagonism toward Sufi-based devotional practices that shapes the attitude of Mappila scholars who have studied Mappila literary culture so far. That is, the mawlud and mala as both devotional genres and practices live a controversial existence in Keralite Islam and their religious legitimacy is both defended and contested within the Islamic tradition.93

But most studies of Mappila literary culture have been carried out by writers who represent the “opposing” side of this internal debate within the tradition, however. I am thinking

93 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to dwell on the arguments and counter-arguments on the religious legitimacy of the mawlud and mala as they are played out in debates among Mappilas who either uphold or reject these contentious practices. Since my interest in this study is to explore what devotional genres do to those Mappilas for whom these genres are integral to the overall program of realizing what they take to be a pious Muslim, I do not have anything to say about this debate here except to note that (a) both sides of the debate invoke orthodoxy or models of “correct practice” in support of their conflicting arguments and, consequently, I see this debate and contestation as an inherent aspect of the “discursive tradition” of Islam, (to follow Talal Asad 1986, 14-17)—as a sign of the vibrancy of the tradition rather than a sign of its crisis; (b) both the practitioners and their detractors operate within different “semeiotic ideologies” (Webb Keane 2003, 2007) that presuppose different assumptions about the (mediated) relationship between God and human beings via revered Islamic figures such as the Prophet and Sufis—ideologies that are, nonetheless, anchored in the Islamic tradition.
here of the influential work of C. N. Ahmad Moulavi and K. K. Muhammad Abdul Kareem entitled *Mahathaya Mappila Sahitya Parambaryam* (The Great Mappila Literary Tradition) published by the authors themselves in 1978. I have no intention to discredit an important work as this which has left an indelible mark on the emerging field of Mappila literary studies. In fact, Moulavi and Kareem painstakingly undertook a study of Mappila literary culture at a time when this topic had actually few takers in the academy and outside. Their work still remains a reference point in contemporary scholarship on Mappila literature. However, the merits of Moulavi and Kareem’s work should not obscure for us from view the analytical traps within it: both Moulavi and Kareem are highly insensitive to the performative aspects of Mappila devotional genres such as the *mawlud* and *mala*. While there is a total silence in their work on the thick texture of the *mawlud* performance, their treatment of the *mala* is marred by an urge—propelled by their “reformist” zeal—to reject the genre and its recitative use as a deviant practice with little or no place in what they consider to be “normative” Islam.94

The dismissive attitude of Moulavi and Kareem toward devotional narratives underwrites their entire discussion of the subject in the book. For example, while acknowledging the artistic merit of *Muhyiddin Mala* (1607), the earliest extant example of the Arabi Malayalam *mala* genre, Moulavi and Kareem smuggle in their ideological dis-ease with devotional piety characteristic of the text: “But, the Quran will never allow one to accept the ideas that this short poem contains” (Moulavi and Kareem 1978, 153). I should clarify that my worry here is not the religious legitimacy of these contentious genres as such—to prove or disprove whether they are “correct” Islamic practices. I am rather worried about the violence in the form of an epistemic

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94 Incidentally, C. N. Ahmad Moulavi (d. 1993) is himself a prominent leader of the *Mujahid* movement in Keralite Islam that strongly opposes “traditional” Islamic practices such as the *mawlud*, saint veneration, and shrine visitation (Miller 1976; Kutty 1995).
foreclosure that such a religiously motivated attitude visits upon any attempt to understand and engage Mappila literary culture of which devotional practices are a constitutive part. In other words, I am concerned with and about the tendency among scholars like Moulavi and Kareem to preempt any adequate engagement with Mappila literary culture by reading theological legitimacy and authenticity into the devotional performance genres of this culture such as the mawlud and mala. This tendency is even more disquieting in that it has come to serve as the normative way to do Mappila literature to date—a tendency that, as I have already discussed, sits comfortably with the approach of “literarization” to Mappila devotional genres by which these genres are reduced to mere cultural objects through an exclusive focus on their formal, stylistic and aesthetic features at the expense of the performative world these genres not only inhabit but also enable.95

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

Mawlud is a devotional performance genre commonly encountered in Keralite Islam. Yet, this devotional literature has not been usually talked about or presented as a Mappila performance genre by mainstream scholarship. Indeed, this genre has been tragically shortchanged by prevalent studies in Mappila literary culture. While there are books published in Malayalam that treat, however sketchily, of various genres of Arabi Malayalam literature, there are virtually none on the subject of mawlud except for a few polemical pamphlets or booklets whose main concern is to secure the theological legitimacy of the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday and the performance of the mawlud narratives on that occasion (Abu 1970; Moulavi and Kareem 1978;

95 For a sampling of this “literarization” approach, see Kunhi 1982; Vallikkunnu 1999, 2008.
Faizy 2008; Saqafi n.d.). Part of my aim in this chapter is to urge that mawlid should be understood as a Mappila devotional performance genre, and controversy around its legitimacy as correct Islamic practice should not be allowed to blind one to the performative world of this genre.96

A typical mawlid gathering in Malabar is a group of men (and women)97 who are seated on the floor of a house/mosque, for example, in a circular or semicircular fashion where incense burns throughout, and sometimes perfume changes hands from one corner of the room to the other.98 Usually, the mawlid is led by a team of musliyars (religious teachers, usually employed

96 Very recently, there is a growing realization among a section of Mappila literati that the mawlid should be treated as a devotional performance genre of Mappilas. In January 2013, the Moyinkutty Vaidyar Mappila Kala Akademi at Kondotty organized a one-day seminar on the mawlid at Vandoor in Malappuram district, which I also attended as one of the invited speakers. Apart from paper presentations on various aspects of the mawlid, the event also included live performance of the mawlid which was recorded for future use. The organizers said that they would publish that recording in CD form for wider public consumption. The seminar further passed a resolution to the effect that as a performance genre of Mappila literary culture, the mawlid should be treated on a par with other Mappila performance arts such as kolkali, oppana, and daff muttu, and should be introduced as a competition item in the annual State School Youth Festival in Kerala hosted by the Education Department of Government of Kerala. Mappila songs, and Mappila performance arts such as kolkali, oppana, and daff muttu are already part of this cultural extravaganza. For brief descriptions of major Mappila art forms, see Hudawi 2014c.

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

98 Of course, I am talking about the bare minimums here: the materials used to add color and vigor to the mawlid occasion vary from place to place, household to household. As for the number of attendees at the mawlid, it also differs across occasions, venues, etc. Of the mawluds I have attended, the ones held in the Huda Masjid at Kizhisseri in the first twelve days of Rabi‘ul Awwal had 40-50 attendees on an average. In the same mosque, the birthday of the Prophet drew more than one hundred participants to the early morning mawlid recitation. In households, I
at local madrasas/mosques) in front of whom is placed some adorned pillow or decorative cloth to hold the prayer manual from which to recite a particular mawlud text.

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

Once a prose narrative comes to a close, as indicated by the reader’s modulation of voice while giving out the last word, the entire group fervently chants salat three times, thereby paving the way for the corresponding poem to be sung with much more fervour. Each poem that follows has attended mawluds where the number of participants ranged from 10 to 20 to 30, and even more, depending on the size and scale of the ritual events.

99 See chapter two for a discussion of the literary genre of mawlid/mawlud, popular mawlid narratives, etc., with a focus on the Manqus Mawlud, a mawlud text in wide circulation in Kerala.
a prose narrative has a familiar refrain (usually called jawab, literally “answer”) to it that all the attendees know by heart, even though many of my informants have got it grammatically wrong due to their lack of knowledge of Arabic. But the important point is that all attendees, including children, are familiar with the jawabs to mawlud poems and they chant them in unison during the mawlud performance. The jawab is repeated after each line of the poem. While the attendees also follow the whole poem that is being sung under the musliyars’ supervision—of course, most of the attendees have committed to memory parts, and some even the whole, of mawlud poems through regular attendance at performances—it is through the jawab that the full participation of attendees is not only secured but also sustained effectively. Note that although Mappilas have basic familiarity with Arabic as the language is so crucial to them liturgically, their literacy in Arabic is largely about recognizing the grapho-phonetic correspondences, and so being capable of producing the right sounds, when reading the Quran, for example. Therefore, the mawlud text, completely in Arabic, does not make any semantic demands upon them. Though some of the attendees I talked to had some sense of what the familiar jawabs meant, the understanding of mawlud texts at the level of semantics for most of average attendees stops at a general feeling that they are extolling the virtues of the Prophet, that they are venerating the Prophet through the narratives being read out and the songs sung—although they have no clue of details in any concrete sense. However, and more importantly, there are numerous words, phrases, proper nouns permeating a mawlud text which induce immediate recognition from the attendees—names and attributes of the Prophet Muhammad, for instance—which in turn evokes appropriate response in the form of invocations and bodies forth attitudes and emotions appropriate for the passages/verses recited such as joy, reverence for the Prophet, longing for his resting place, etc. Thus, the reception of mawluds by ordinary Mappilas does not reside as much in silent,
privatized consumption of texts as in the kinesthetic responses that these texts engender such as appropriate invocations, body movements and gestures (compare Hirschkind 2006).

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

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

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

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

As noted in chapter two, the most popular of the *mawlid* texts among Mappilas, however, is the *Manqus Mawlad*, which Mappilas have traditionally attributed to a renowned Mappila ‘alim (religious scholar) of Yemeni Arab descent, Shaikh Zainuddin b. Ali al-Makhdum al-Malabari (d.1521), also called “the senior Makhdum.” A typical *mawlid* recitation among Mappilas, however, involves selections from both *Manqus* and *Sharraf al-Anam*—the latter is especially, though by no means exclusively, brought in in order to make use of its popular *Ashraqa Bayt* that literally has the attendees rise to their feet to perform the *qiym*.¹⁰⁰ It should

¹⁰⁰ While there are many other *mawlid* texts popular among Mappilas, including *Badr Mawlad* (in honour of the holy martyrs of the famous Battle of Badr in early Muslim history), I confine my analysis and ethnographic account to *Manqus* and *Sharraf al-Anam*, the two most famous *mawlid* texts, that are often combined in performance at the *mawluds* I have attended. My own view is that focusing on *mawluds* where these two texts are recited—mostly in part—is sufficient to give us a fairly good sense of how the *mawlid* as a devotional genre plays a constitutive role in the self-fashioning of Mappilas.
be noted that despite being part of the *mawlid Sharraf al-Anam*, the *Ashraqa Bayt* often figures as a single work in the Mappila prayer book for ready use.

Both *Manqus* and *Sharraf al-Anam*, like other *mawluds* and devotional songs, circulate in prayer manuals/pamphlets which are synecdochically called *mawlood kitab* (book of *mawlood*) or *edu* (literally “leaf” or “page” of a book)—more interestingly, these prayer manuals are also known as *sabeenas/safeenas*, a word which I have in fact learnt from my mother at a very early age and then kept hearing often as I grew up in a village in South Malabar. It may be recalled that the word “*sabeena*” is a corruption of the Persian “*shabeena*” which means “nocturnal” (Kareem 1983). Since Mappilas used to (and continue to) recite *mawluds*, *malas*, and other devotional songs, and a variety of litanies from the prayer book daily at night, most especially between *maghrīb* (sunset prayer) and ‘*isha*’ (night prayer), the prayer book was also called *sabeena/safeena* metonymically, meaning “that which is recited at night” (see chapter four for more on the Mappila *sabeena*).

In actual practice, the use of *mawlood* narratives in Malabar, as elsewhere in Muslim societies, extends well beyond the occasion of the Prophet’s birthday, only an annual event, to the daily grind of life for devout Muslims. The *mawlood* performs a tremendous array of literary, thaumaturgical, liturgical, and religious functions for the Sunni Mappilas. They range from personal acts of piety and devotion to the Prophet, to its widespread public recitation, especially, in many areas other than the Prophet’s birthday: at wakes, housewarmings, marriages, in fulfilment of vows, before the start of a new undertaking, and so forth. While it is also recited by Mappila Muslims individually for its meritorious and numinous value, in fulfilment of desires,

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101 In this chapter I have referred to the texts of *Manqus* and *Sharraf al-Anam* as they appear in *151 Vaka Mawlid Kitab*, C. H. Ibrahim Kutty and Brothers, n. d., pp. 83-93 and pp. 61-82, respectively.
etc. the mawlud is more commonly held collectively at households, mosques, and public venues. Indeed, most of the mawluds I attended during my fieldwork in parts of Malappuram district in South Malabar were held in connection with housewarmings, wakes, and death anniversaries of family members, although the mawluds which were performed in fulfilment of vows and simply to gain barkat (blessing) and earn merit were not uncommon.¹⁰²

The Islamic month of Rabi’ul Awwal which witnessed the Prophet’s birth, is the month of the mawlud par excellence in Malabar—in this month, especially throughout its first twelve days, the twelfth day being the birthday of the Prophet, recitations and chants of mawlud narratives literally submerge the devotional soundscape of Mappila villages and towns. Though household events are not rare during this month, the mosque becomes the privileged site for the mawlud throughout the first two weeks of the month. The recitations are usually held in the evening between the sunset and night prayers (maghrib and ‘isha’) or immediately after the night prayer (‘isha’). This mosque-centered mawlud festivity culminates in a well-attended, recital of the

¹⁰² There are popular mawlud occasions held at regular intervals in different parts of Malappuram district of northern Kerala. Examples are the weekly mawlud of Mundambra and the famous local mawlud (nattu mawlud) of Tanur. Mundambra is a village near Areacode town in Malappuram. The weekly mawlud here is held every Monday night at the local mosque and it involves the recitation of the Manqus Mawlud. It was reportedly started about a century ago at the behest of a local scholar who suggested the mawlud recitation as a cure when cholera broke out at Mundambra, leaving a trail of death over the area. Tanur is a coastal town in Malappuram. The annual local mawlud festival held here on Friday nights of the Islamic month of Rabi’ul Aqir, again, was started more than a century ago as a cure for cholera and plague that were raging through the locality. The Tanur local mawlud includes recitation of constellations of mawlud texts, including the Manqus Mawlud, Muhyiddin Mawlud (a mawlud in honour of the Sufi master Shaikh Muhyiddin Abdul Qadir al-Jilani), and Rifaii Mawlud (a mawlud venerating the Sufi leader Shaikh Ahmad al-Kabir al-Rifaii)—all circulating in the Mappila prayer book called mawlud kitab/sabeena (Faizy 2008). On a personal note, I have participated in the local mawlud festival at Tanur once, although I did so more as a practitioner than as an ethnographer. However, my ethnographic data in this dissertation does not concern either the Mundambra Mawlud or the Tanur Mawlud. Nonetheless, I believe that field analysis of these popular mawlud gatherings will yield greater insight into the sociality of many contemporary Mappilas.
mawlud on the early morning of the twelfth day of Rabi‘ul Awwal to coincide with the time of the Prophet’s birth which, according to tradition in circulation among my informants, took place in the early hours nearing the break of dawn on a Monday—the time that is just before the time of the obligatory dawn prayer (subhi). After a mawlud at the mosque, blessed sweets or pudding known as chirni—a corruption of the Persian word “shirini,” literally “sweets”—is served. Usually sponsored by residents of a mahallu, (literally, “place,” but in Mappila usage refers to a demarcated area of Muslim population of varying size under the jurisdiction of a local congregational mosque known as juma’ masjid/jama’at palli with a qadi—Islamic scholar who advises Muslims on Islamic personal law—at its helm), chirni can be anything from snacks, bakery, dates to a meal. But the typical, much sought after, chirni for the mosque mawlud among the Mappilas I worked with is what they call kava/kulavi, which is traditional South Indian pudding or payasam that mainly includes cracked wheat, coconut and jaggery. Mappila families in a mahallu vie with each other to sponsor kava to be served at mosque mawluds. Since most mosques usually hold mawluds only for the first twelve days of Rabi‘ul Awwal, only a few families get the chance to sponsor kava. In fact, as many of my informants have told me, they all contact people on the mosque board enquiring if they can offer kava to a mosque mawlud in Rabi‘ul Awwal only to be told that all the spots are “booked.”

Key to devotional piety tied up with the mawlud is the concept of baraka—or barkat in Mappila Malayalam (see chapter four for a brief discussion of the concept of baraka). Here, the attendee does benefit not only from the merit resulting from his pious acts of recitation of and participation in the mawlud but also from the baraka associated with the figure of the Prophet, the spatial and temporal specificities of the mawlud, and so on. Barkat permeates everything that is connected with the mawlud—space, time, text, food, etc. The mawlud majlis (venue), mawlud
text, sabeena, and chirni all are understood to be embodiments and conduits of barkat.

Consequently, the mawlud is not just about the recitation of the devotional text—since barkat is an all-pervasive force, chirni, a seemingly mundane thing, also assumes a central place in the overall performative complex of the mawlud. An important consequence of barkat for ethical cultivation as it is envisaged in the Mappila imaginary is that the auspicious power of the mawlud transforms one’s daily conduct of life by cultivating in the practitioner the virtuous love for the Prophet which in turn helps her acquire adab, the proper Islamic conduct, and finally get closer to God—the ultimate end of ethical formation as the Mappilas see it. As Pokkar, a businessman based in Malappuram town, pointed out, “Thanks to the barkat of the revered (mahanmar), we become conscious of our evil ways and try to live our lives in fear of God, in worship of Him (padachone pedichu, onu ‘ibadatheduthu). Note that barkat is here is tied to bodily acts such as reciting the mawlud, visiting mosques, Sufi shrines, and even eating chirni that accompany a devotional practice such as the mawlud. Mawlud generates barkat that has implications for the life of the attendees beyond the immediate spatial and temporal coordinates of the mawlud: it also influences how the attendees conduct their affairs on a day-to-day basis so that they remain aware of their ultimate obligation to live in accord with the will of God—that is, as a true Muslim or, in Pokkar’s words above, “in fear of God.”

Part of the mawlud festivity during Rabi’ul Awwal also includes the mawlud procession taken out on the streets of villages and towns during which mawlud songs and other praise poems to the Prophet pour out of loudspeakers, and, more usually now, to the accompaniment of a traditional Mappila art form called daffmuttu. The procession usually winds through the alleys,

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103 Daffmuttu is a popular Mappila art form in which the performers beat daffu (also daf), a type of frame drum, and make set movements to the tune of accompanying songs which extol the
streets and thoroughfares of each mahallu. Yet another component of the mawlud festivity is a public mawlud meet or gathering, often called nabidina sammelanam, at each local mosque (or madrasa, traditional Islamic institution, attached to it) where young madrasa students give short Islamic sermons celebrating the life of the Prophet, among others, and sing a variety of praise songs in both Malayalam and Arabic—although sometimes poetry and oratory in other Indian languages such as Urdu are also featured in order to add colour and flavour to the occasion. This public event is greatly appreciated because in addition to its general meritorious aspects characteristic of the mawlud, it also serves as a platform where the youth of Mappila community cut their oratorical and artistic teeth in a strictly religious setting and environment. It also helps the community to re/orient and channel to Islamic ends the creative and artistic potentialities of its young generation who daily spend most of their time in secular liberal spaces such as public schools and universities which, as the Mappilas I worked with noted, render the task of becoming a pious Muslim extremely difficult. Kuttyamu, a trader by profession and a key organizer of Islamic activities at Kizhisseri, a town north of Malappuram district, with whom I have attended several mawluds not only in Rabi’ul Awwal but in other months as well, commented to me about public mawlud meetings thus:

We live in such an age where it is very hard to live a “proper” (sharikkum) Muslim life so it is important to hold events of this sort (mawlud) so that we and, especially, our children can try to keep to the demands of what it means to be a Muslim.

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virtues of the Prophet and other religiously important figures such as the Prophet’s companions and Sufis.
Note that in the religious imaginary of Mappilas like Kuttyamu, *mawulđ*’s theological/juridical authenticity is not the moot point—he instead sees the *mawulđ* festivity and a variety of practices that go into it as constitutive of becoming a good Muslim. Key to this imaginary are the virtues of love, joy and reverence for the Prophet which are understood to be nothing more than an article of faith that serves both as a means and an end.

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

First of all, it is all about it’amu al-ta’am (serving food) which is in and of itself an ‘amal swalih (virtuous deed) as the Prophet had said when once asked about the best of deeds that a Muslim could do. Second—and note this very carefully (valare shradhichu kelkkanam)—we are feasting at the mawlud also because we need to love Muthu Nabi (the beloved Prophet)—you know, we can’t accomplish our iman (faith) if we don’t truly love him more than anything else in this world—and this is a hadith. Also, hasn’t Allah said in the Quran: “The Prophet is more deserving of—and closer to—the mu’minin (the faithful) than their own selves?” Now, you might ask: What does it mean to love Muthu Nabi? In short, it involves following in his footsteps (avarude patha pintudaruka). It also involves rejoicing over his birth without which Allah would not have created this world! So we owe everything to Muthu Nabi whose nur (light) Allah created before he created everything else.

Listen, I am not cooking up all these stories (njan ithu veruthe parayukayalla). These are all found in kitabs (authoritative religious books). Even mawluds teach us these things. How does Manqus Mawlud begin? It begins with “Exalted be Allah who brought out in the month of Rabi’ul Awwal the moon that is the Prophet of guidance, created the Prophet’s light before He created the world and named him Muhammad!” You see, exuding joy over the Prophet’s birth is also part of loving him. Thus, when we serve food at the mawlud, it is doubly virtuous, as it were: we serve food, which is in itself part of the Sunna (tradition) of Muthu Nabi, but we also do so on account of our love for Nabi Tangal (the Prophet). We know that we don’t feel true love for him at first but if we
continue to recite the mawlud and participate in mawlud feasts, and say salat (invocations on the Prophet), we will gradually cultivate love for Nabi Tangal, which, if developed fully, will guide us through our daily life and then, you know, we won’t go astray. That love will keep us to the sunna of Nabi Tangal.

Nothing associated with the mawlud is in vain, nothing! No matter how trivial it might look to our eyes. Inviting people to the mawlud, assisting in making arrangements for the mawlud in mosques and elsewhere, amassing monetary and other resources for the mawlud celebrations in mahallus, preparing the mawlud feast—anything and everything connected with the mawlud is important and meritorious, and earns the doer the riza (pleasure) of both Allah and his Messenger.

I have allowed Baqavi to speak at some length for himself and the Mappilas whom he serves so that we can learn from Mappilas themselves about the heart of the program of self-cultivation made possible by the mawlud in all its constitutive facets—from the recitation of the mawlud text to the serving of food at the end. Baqavi calls attention to the key emotions appropriate to the devotional practice of the mawlud: love and reverence for the Prophet and joy at his much sought after birth. Indeed, mawlud texts are not lacking in references to these emotions underlying the celebration of the mawlud. For example, in Manqus there are references to the mawlid being celebrated in expression of joy at the Prophet’s birth (farahan bi mawlidi rasulillahi). The evocation and expression of appropriate emotions that Baqavi places at the center of the Mappila mawlud resonate with the practice of the mawlid celebration in the larger Islamic world. In this
tradition, sentiments such as joy and love are treated as concrete matters to be regulated under the Islamic law (shari‘a) which in turn are subject to divine reward and punishment.

Accordingly, evoking and manifesting joy and delight at the birth of the Prophet is considered by the mawlid practitioners to be a religious act which is no less obligatory. Similarly, love of the Prophet is also deemed to be an obligation on the part of Muslims and there are authoritative hadiths to this effect, including the one alluded to in the excerpt from Baqavi’s lesson—i.e., a true believer ought to love the Prophet more dearly than “his parents, his children, and the whole humankind” (min validihi va valadihi va al-nasi ajma ‘in).\(^\text{104}\) Moreover, there is an impressive body of Islamic literature that thematizes the emotions such as joy and love that are appropriate to the mawlid celebration, and as this is available elsewhere, I do not wish to rehearse it here (see Katz 2007 for a useful summary). What is remarkable, however, is that since the necessary emotions such as joy, love, reverence, and gratitude are impalpable in and of themselves, they must find expression in outward activities. To rejoice, to love, to revere, and to be grateful—they are all not mere subjective feelings but performative acts as well. Therefore, these emotions manifest themselves in a variety of external acts such as recitation, singing, standing, taking out procession, decorating, feasting, etc. It is to these performative conventions whereby joy and delight, love and reverence for the Prophet are acted out in publicly recognized forms that Baqavi draws our attention when he talks about feeding people, reciting the mawlid, organizing the mawlid celebrations, and so on. Since most Mappilas do not understand Arabic, the role of imams/qadis like Baqavi in inculcating among Mappilas the devotional model undergirding the mawlid is paramount. Each mahallu organizes a host of Islamic lessons, usually known to Mappilas as “mata padanal/Quran classukal,” on a regular

basis that are aimed at educating ordinary Mappilas about a wide range of topics, including the mawlud and saint veneration. The lesson delivered by Baqavi from which I have just quoted is a case in point. I further discuss this Islamic homiletic tradition towards the end of the next chapter.

Two points are analytically consequential in the passage extracted from Baqavi’s lesson that help us appreciate the ethical work that the mawlud enacts in crafting the Mappila self. First, the understanding of the mawlud in Baqavi’s framework views the mawlud not as merely expressive, but also constitutive, of the virtues of the love and reverence for the Prophet—and similar appropriate dispositions such joy and gratitude—which, on this understanding, are thought to be an article of faith incumbent upon all Muslims. That is to say, mawlud attendees do not enter into the mawlud with an always already set of emotions and dispositions appropriate to the performance of the mawlud such as the love and reverence for the Prophet. Instead, it is also through the mawlud and related practices such as invocation of salat that they develop such virtuous emotions and affects. Second, on this understanding, the mawlud is construed as both a means and an end and there is no necessary separation between the two (compare Mahmood 2005). It is an end because the virtue of love for the Prophet underpinning the celebration of the mawlud is considered by Mappilas like Baqavi to be an obligation on the part of the believers—something that is necessary to accomplish their faith (iman). The mawlud and the virtuous love one cultivates through it are also a means in that they also inform the way one conducts oneself daily in life, thereby help one realize the larger goal of being a pious Muslim who is closer to God—of being a muttaqwi (roughly “God-fearing”). Notably, in this framing, the performance of the mawlud by bodying forth appropriate emotions and gestures is a necessary, and not a contingent, act in the acquisition of both the virtuous love for the Prophet and piety in general.
These two points are also key to apprehending the particular Mappila self that is fashioned through the ritual performances centered on the *mala* genre in Mappila literary culture. I explore this tradition in the following chapter.