CONCLUSION

Genre, Devotion, and Self-Fashioning: Reflections on the Poetics of Piety

Employing textual analysis, history, and ethnography, this dissertation has examined the devotional performance genres of the *mawlud* and *mala* frequently encountered in the literary culture of the Malayalam-speaking Mappila Muslims of Kerala in South India. My focus in the study has been on the social production and performative aspects of the *mawlud* and *mala*, which, as I have argued throughout, are crucial to an understanding of these genres as literature and devotional medium/practice. By the performative aspects of these genres I mean the production, circulation, copying, reading, reciting, and singing, etc. of the *mawlud* and *mala*. In this regard, one of my major concerns in this study has remained the constitutive role of these genres in the self-fashioning, both historically and contemporaneously, of many Mappilas who participate in the devotional practices of the *mawlud* and *mala*. I have also tried to demonstrate how Arabi Malayalam and its corpus of devotional literature have helped forge a Mappila literary formation, in which saint veneration has remained a salient form of piety.

Throughout this dissertation, I have written against some regnant approaches that have hitherto directed the course of studies in Mappila literary culture. I have called these approaches *literarization, folklorization, puritanism, and syncretism* and I have discussed each one of them in detail in chapter one. In that chapter I called attention to the discomforts and dis-eases that devotional/religious literature provokes in scholars of (Mappila) literature. My main problem with these interpretive grids is that they foreclose any critical engagement with the intriguing
performative world of devotional genres of Mappila literary culture. Against this background, I have suggested a context-sensitive, performance-based (textual) approach which pays attention to the ways that texts and communities are co-produced, sees texts/genres as practices rather than as ideas, and sheds light on the workings of literature vis-à-vis the community that produces, and is produced, by it. Such an approach is all the more important when one studies devotional performance genres such as the mawlid and mala, which are intended for recitation and performance and which work as devotional medium/practice.

The second chapter introduced the devotional genre of mawlid/mawlid and discussed important mawlid narratives found in constellations mawlid texts across the Muslim world with special reference to the Manqus Mawlud, a mawlid text in wide circulation among Mappila Muslims of Kerala. This chapter provides original translation and brief interpretation of the Manqus by way of illustrating the world of mawlid narratives. In chapters three and four my focus has been on the cultural practice of Arabi Malayalam and its devotional poetry. In chapter three I developed an idea of Mappila literary formation enabled and fostered by Arabi Malayalam literary culture, the mala genre in particular. Chapter four extended this argument by taking up for special analysis a popular early seventeenth-century Arabi Malayalam garland song, Muhyiddin Mala, by Qadi Muhammad of Calicut. Saint veneration as an outstanding form of piety in the Mappila literary formation is brought into sharp relief here. The chapter also explored an alternative/parallel (Arabi Malayalam) literacy movement that the Mappila literary formation facilitated—a movement often belittled and dismissed in colonial, state and mainstream representations of the Mappila community.

Chapters five and six have taken the ethnographic plunge. Here, I tried to give ethnographic anchorage to the constitutive role that devotional performance genres such as the
mawlud and mala play in contemporary Mappila self-fashioning. Of course, I am talking of those Mappilas who consider the devotional practices of the mawlud and mala as appropriate forms of Islamic piety and tools for ethical self-improvement. Also, I am not passing any judgement on the personal piety of the Mappilas I have worked with—I am not saying that these Mappilas are invariably pious. This is something I have no access to as an ethnographer. My analysis was restricted to what the performative dimensions of the mawlud and mala entail, and how these genres help produce and hone ethical selfhood among the Mappilas I have studied, which is by no means a statement on the overall personal piety of these Mappilas. Chapter five began by discussing relevant critical terminology and providing a brief note on my ethnographic experience. It then offered an ethnography of contemporary Mappila devotion associated with the mawlud narratives. Chapter six turned the ethnographic focus onto the mala genre by analyzing how garland songs such as Muhyiddin Mala and Nafeesath Mala continue to fashion the contemporary Mappila self.

Now, in the concluding section of this dissertation, I want to end by briefly reiterating what I have tried to do (and not to do) in the preceding pages. I have studied a literary culture with an emphasis on its devotional performance genres. I focused on devotional genres for some particular reasons. First, I found that in extant scholarship on Mappila literature a strong distaste for devotional literature was palpable: inasmuch as devotional genres such as the mala were discussed, a special care was taken to discuss them as mere “literary” texts without sparing any thought for their devotional content and value. In this scholarship, an attempt to talk about the poeticality of devotional songs independent of their devotional content was made at best; or devotional poetry was dismissed altogether at worst. The mawlud tradition was brushed aside out of hand. Second, devotional performance genres are central to the self-fashioning of many
Mappila men and women even today. Thus, a study of these genres casts light on the sociality of Mappilas who consider them as formative of who they are—of becoming the kinds of “good, pious Muslims” they choose to be. Put differently, these genres have enormous historical and socio-cultural value and therefore they are highly important to any understanding of the culture and peoples they are part of.

However, since I have studied Mappila devotional performance genres such as the mawlud and mala by emphasizing the devotional, performative character of these genres—by urging that these literary genres should be examined with due attention to their devotional functions and performative uses—readers may find a sort of (implicit) tension throughout the dissertation between the devotional (piety) and literary strands or strains of devotional performance genres of Mappila literary culture. This tension might mirror a larger tension between religion and literature as two crucial human concerns, even though the two interface in myriad ways and never function as mutually exclusive categories. While in my analysis I try to foreground the devotional, performative uses of these genres, I do not intend to do so by letting go of the literary strain at all. The question that I ask in this work is not whether Mappila literary culture is more “devotional” than “literary” or vice versa, whatever that means. My point is quite simple: in understanding devotional performance narratives such as the mawlud and mala, an abstract formalist approach to literature is woefully inadequate, and therefore it is important to look at these narratives from a performance-based (textual) standpoint that pays full attention to what these devotional narratives do to their performers and practitioners, how they fashion their daily conduct in life, and so on. Thus, the poeticality or “literariness” of this body of devotional literature is as important as its devotional content and value. In other words, the devotional effectiveness of these genres are in fact contingent up on their literary, aesthetic and stylistic
qualities and characteristics—a point captured in the phrase “poetics of piety,” the first part of the title of this dissertation. On this view, pitting the devotional/performative against the literary/aesthetic does not make any sense.

Also, in critiquing the reductionist acts of formalist “literarization” in Mappila literary studies, I do not mean to say that formalism (or formalist readings of the literary) exhausts the field of literature as such. It should be borne in mind that I am using the term “literarization” very specifically to refer to a tendency (which I criticize in this work) among scholars of Mappila literary traditions to formalize and objectify literary texts as mere cultural symbols that do not have any bearing upon one’s ways of being and acting in the world. This formalist approach is not interested in why Mappilas recite/perform the mawlud and mala in the first place, what this recitation/performance entails or achieves, why this performative dimension is crucial to any understanding of these devotional genres and the community that produced them, etc. However, my usage of the term “literarization” in a specific context is not a comment on the idea of the “literary” that informs my analytics in this study. Against what I critique as “literarization,” I have tried to argue that one needs to move beyond or exceed the reductionist formalisms of the literary and that the performance, social production, and social life of texts/genres should all come to define the “literariness” of those texts/genres, apart from their formal, stylistic features and literary devices. Once again, the formal, stylistic features and literary devices of a text/genre are by no means epiphenomenal to its performance and social life.

Similarly, my emphasis on viewing Mappila devotional genres as socio-cultural practices and my overall sociological approach to the study of Mappila literary culture are not intended to limit the genres in question, and by extension the whole problematic of Mappila literary culture, to historical and ethnographic (i.e. “regional”) domains. Even as both history and ethnography—
in their different ways—can help provide specificity for the sociological aspects of Mappila literary culture, an inquiry that seeks to bring together the devotional/performative and the literary will assist in taking this study beyond the regional circumscriptions, if any.

Piety is the central motif of this dissertation—hence my focus on the devotional performance genres of Mappila literary culture. It is true that there is a wide range of poetic-song genres within this literary culture, including romance, war-songs/heroic ballads, praise poetry, and devotional verse, as I have mentioned in chapter three. Then, why focus on the *mawlid* and *mala* alone, the so-called devotional performance narratives? Or why privilege the “pious” over all the other kinds of expression and practice that emerge from this literary culture? To begin with, I am not presenting the *mawlid* and *mala* as the microcosm of the whole of Mappila literary culture, although I do insist on their centrality to the formation and resilience of this literary culture. While I forefront the constitutive role of these genres in the development of what I have called a Mappila literary formation, I do not intend to reduce the whole culture/formation to the devotional performance narratives. Second, piety has been crucial to my idea of a literary formation, and saint veneration has remained a massive form of piety within this formation. So I have singled out the *mala* as an Arabi Malayalam devotional performance genre in order to show how this genre has helped constitute the Mappila literary formation I have been talking about. Third, Mappila self-fashioning is one of my key concerns in this study, and piety is internal to the conceptual architecture of this programme of self-fashioning.\(^{126}\) Consequently, I have tried to

\(^{126}\) It may be argued that people who are committed to living piously and consistently engaged in honing the affects of piety frequently fail to live up to their religious commitments and often invoke nonreligious ideas in order to try to make sense of their experience, and therefore “piety” is not a factor in the self-fashioning process. One is right in pointing to ambivalence and contradiction as common elements of people’s existence but this does not deny people’s commitment to living a pious life. The attempt to live in accord with pious ideals does not make one’s life free of contradiction but, rather, shapes and informs the way one understands and
demonstrate how devotional genres have engendered Mappila self-fashioning both historically and contemporaneously. So much for the issue of the selectivity of the devotional performance genres such as the *mawlud* and *mala* from the wide-ranging literary culture of Mappilas.

A related point is that the *mawlud* and *mala* live a controversial existence within models of Mappila devotional piety, as I have indicated in no uncertain terms elsewhere in the dissertation. “Reformist” movements in Keralite Islam have dismissed this devotional literature as “un-Islamic” practice, while the so-called “traditionalist” Mappilas have affirmed this literature’s status as appropriate form of Islamic piety. So not all Mappilas relate to the *mawlud* and *mala* the way the Mappilas I discuss in this work do, that is, in terms of pious religiosity. It is important to keep in mind this tension attending Mappila devotional performance genres—a tension that became acute since the 1920s when “reformist” and “traditionalist” Islamic groups started to become active in Kerala\(^{127}\)—even as one tries to point up their centrality to the formation of Mappila literary culture.

\(^{127}\)The Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham, the early “reformist” Islamic organization in Kerala, was founded in 1922 by such Muslim leaders as Vakkam Moulavi (d. 1932), K. M. Moulavi (d. 1964) and E. K. Moulavi. The main objectives of the Sangham included: “To unite the Muslims of Kerala under the banner of Islam and to fight the superstitions and un-Islamic practices and beliefs among them” (Kutty 1995, 73; emphasis added). Among these “un-Islamic” practices were the *mawlud* and *mala*. The Aikya Sangham is the precursor of the contemporary “reformist” Islamic group known as Kerala Nadwathul Mujahideen (KNM) established in Calicut in 1950. To oppose the “innovative” and “deviant” ideas and practices of the Aikya Sangham, “traditionalist” Muslim scholars under the leadership of Varakkal Mullakoya Thangal (d. 1933) formed an organization of Muslim religious scholars called “Samastha Kerala Jam‘iyathul Ulama” in Calicut in 1926. Followers of Samastha and its splinter groups are usually known as “Sunnis,” whereas followers of KNM are called “Mujahids”. Samastha defended devotional practices like the *mawlud* and *mala* and asserted that they were part of what
It is true that in the recent past Mappila devotional performance narratives such as the *mawlud* and *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). This appropriation, however, does not obviate the originary devotional uses of these genres but points to the different lives these genres enjoy beyond their immediate devotional, ritual contexts. Although this appropriation question is not a concern in my dissertation, I believe that an examination of this aspect would be worth the effort.

While the mass media, including the Internet, has facilitated and accelerated the appropriation of devotional literature for popular entertainment, it has also opened up novel forms and manifestations of devotional practice. Recent scholarship has cast light on aspects of electronically mediated devotional discourse and activity in Muslim societies (Hirschkind 2006, 2012; Eisenlohr 2006, 2009). For example, Charles Hirschkind (2006) has shown how Cairene men associated with the Islamic Revival in contemporary Egypt have used cassette sermon audition as a tool for ethical self-improvement. In a more recent article on “YouTube Khutba,” Hirschkind (2012, 5) explores what he calls “online experiments in ethical affect” by analyzing it considered to be proper Islamic practice. In understanding the Samastha/Mujahid divide, the dichotomy “traditionalist”/”reformist” is not helpful, however (see my discussion of this point at the end of chapter six). Samastha leaders who are often described as “traditionalist” saw themselves as “reformers.” This is also true of the Barelwi/Deobandi divide in North Indian Islam (Metcalf 1982; Sanyal 1996). On Samastha, see its website [http://samastha.info/](http://samastha.info/). For details on Aikya Sangham and the Mujahid movement, visit the KNM website [http://knm.org.in/](http://knm.org.in/).
the short video segments of Islamic Friday sermons (*khutbas*) placed on the video-sharing website YouTube. He examines the ways in which some of the norms of ethical and devotional comportment associated with sermons in the mosque carry over into the Internet context of sermon audition/viewing while also enabling newer forms of pious interaction, argument, and listening.\(^{128}\) Similarly, Patrick Eisenlohr (2006, 2009) discusses the circulation of audiocassette and audio-CD recordings of the Islamic devotional performance genre *na ’t* in Mauritius and its role in shaping performances of this genre on various occasions such as the birthday of the Prophet, weddings, housewarmings, and so on. *Na ’t* are devotional poems in Urdu that extols the virtues of the Prophet and other revered Islamic figures.\(^{129}\) The reciting of and receptive listening to *na ’t*, is best seen as an act of pious transformation that not only expresses the practitioners’ experiences of love and deep affection for the Prophet, but also produces in them such pious affects (Eisenlohr 2006, 2009). The electronic mediation and circulation of Islamic devotional genres have led to the extension of these genre into contexts in which they were previously absent, such as listening to *na ’t* alone at home or in the car, but the Internet has emerged as a unique site of devotional practice with its own forms of expression and argument, providing as it does immediate and instant access to an unlimited archive of heterogeneous contents.

The use of media technologies—such as the cassette tapes, audio/video CDs, video players, and more commonly now the Internet, including the video-sharing website YouTube and the social networking sites Facebook and WhatsApp—has also affected the circulation, reception, performance and consumption of Mappila devotional genres such as the *mawlud* and

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\(^{128}\) In addition, Hirschkind discusses the impact of changing media technologies, including the Internet, on Islamic ethical and epistemological traditions in an article titled “Media and the Quran.” See Hirschkind 2003.

\(^{129}\) For a brief entry on *na ’t*, see Hudawi 2014b.
mala. Audiocassette and video-CD recordings of the mawlud and mala, and other Islamic devotional genres such as praise poetry and Islamic sermons, have become widely available in Kerala: at small shops and bookstalls around shrines in Malabar one is often greeted with a euphonious mixture of devotional songs and sermons played aloud from the little shops standing cheek by jowl, intended to attract customers. YouTube also contains several videos of the mawlud and mala genres, including the Manqus Mawlud, Muhyiddin Mala, and Nafeesath Mala—texts I have discussed in this dissertation. Although an analysis of electronically and online mediated Mappila devotional narratives is important to an understanding of the changed dynamics of devotional practices these narratives have engendered in contemporary Kerala, such an analysis has not been a concern in my study. This is mainly because electronic mediation has not come up as a key aspect in the recitation and singing of the mawlud and mala by the Mappilas I worked with. I have focused on the performances of these genres in real situations in Mappila life and their implications for Mappila self-fashioning, not on the recordings of these performances and their uses as tools/sites of devotional practice. Yet, since mediatization has also affected Mappila devotional performance genres in contemporary times, I think that this issue suggests itself as a topic for further research.

Before I conclude, I want to piece together some of the topics for further study which I have already suggested in different chapters of this dissertation. First, a thoroughgoing philological investigation of mawlud texts and texts of Arabi Malayalam literary works remains long overdue. Second, the dynamics of book production in Mappila literary culture deserves special scholarly attention. Third, a comprehensive socio-linguistic study of Arabi Malayalam as a Mappila hybrid dialect can hardly be ignored. Fourth, an extensive study of the Mappila prayerbook known as sabeena/mawlid kitab/edu and of Mappila Muslim devotions in general
can yield useful results. Finally, Mappila women’s devotional life can be captured in rich detail through more focused ethnographic research. Although I have not been able, and in some cases prepared, to take up these important topics for serious inquiry within the confines of my project, a well-researched critical engagement with these issues will definitely be a significant step in the direction of appreciating Mappilas and their literary culture better and in broader perspective.

In the last analysis, this dissertation does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of Mappila devotional genres, much less Mappila literary culture. What it has aimed to do is to open up a new line of inquiry that would help us understand Mappila literary traditions in all their richness and complexity. I have insisted on a context-oriented (textual) approach to Mappila literary studies and I have tried to show how such an approach is crucial to an appreciation of Mappila devotional performance genres, the mawlud and mala in particular. Many genres of Mappila literature, including those analyzed in my work, still remain greatly understudied outside of the Malayalam language, albeit their relevance to a variety of fields in South and Southeast Asian studies—in histories, cultures, languages and religions. In practical terms, introducing these genres in English by providing original translations and detailed interpretations will go a long way in attracting international critical/scholarly attention to this rich body of literature. Such an exercise would be an important contribution not only to the field of Malayalam and Kerala studies but also to contemporary research on Islam transmitted and practiced in South and Southeast Asian languages and cultures. In an attempt to shape a much-needed multidisciplinary approach to Mappila literary and cultural studies, I have made use of a wide spectrum of sources available in Malayalam, Arabic, Arabi Malayalam, and English languages, while drawing insights from a host of disciplines such as literary and cultural studies, history, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. It is hoped that despite its obvious limitations,
this study offers a fresh and more holistic view of devotional performance genres of Mappila literary culture and inspires similar studies in Mappila literary culture in particular and literary cultures across communities and languages in general.