Within the relatively under-explored arc of South Indian Muslim literary tradition, the legacy of the Malayalam-speaking Mappila Muslims of Kerala is doubly under-explored. Notwithstanding a new-found scholarly interest in the Muslims of Malabar/Kerala in recent times, the field of Mappila studies has not yet carved a niche for itself as a full-blown, recognizable area of inquiry. Even within the emergent scholarship on the Muslims of Kerala, the vast body of literature in Arabic and Arabi Malayalam produced by the Malayali Muslims continues to have limited purchase among scholars and researchers despite its centrality to the self-fashioning of Keralite Islam both historically and contemporaneously. Arabi Malayalam, a unique dialect written in the Arabic script, with Malayalam grammar and vocabulary drawn from Malayalam, Arabic, Tamil, Persian, Urdu, etc. presents a rich tradition of devotional performance literature. Much of existing research on Mappila literary culture has either overlooked or backgrounded the performative aspects of this culture as if they were an epiphenomenon inconsequential for an understanding of the Mappila lifescape.

In an attempt to reclaim lost ground and provide a long-overdue corrective to the regnant modes of analysis in Mappila literary studies, this dissertation first seeks to account for the contemporary scholarly neglect of, and/or dis-ease with, Mappila devotional performance genres and calls attention to the necessity of a performance-based (textual) approach to the study of Mappila literary culture. Second, I want to forefront the constitutive role of Arabi Malayalam and its fertile repertoires of devotional performance literature in forging what I call the Mappila literary formation. Third, I explore in ethnographic detail the devotional practices of Mappila
literary culture in contemporary Kerala, thereby shedding light on how Mappila devotional performance genres such as the *mawlud* and *mala* continue to be relevant to the self-fashioning of many Mappila men and women. 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. My methods of inquiry will include a combination of history, ethnography, and textual analysis.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I provide a brief account of the background to my study as well as lay down my methods of inquiry, methodological orientations and analytics. The introduction also underscores the multi-disciplinary character of my investigation. The first chapter situates my study of Mappila literary culture in its context by critically reviewing extant scholarship on the subject and by briefly outlining the points of departure for my inquiry. Here I first critique the dominant ways in which Mappila literary culture has hitherto been studied—approaches that I describe as “literarization,” “folklorization,” “religious puritanism,” and “syncretism,” which I find analytically reductive and unhelpful—and then make a case for a context-based mode of analysis for an understanding of the richness and complexity of Mappila literary traditions.

The second chapter discusses *mawlud* narratives that saturate Mappila devotional life in Kerala. My concern here is to introduce some of the popular *mawlid* narratives frequently encountered in contemporary Mappila devotionalism, and not to provide an exhaustive list of *mawlud* texts that Mappilas have known to date. In the third chapter, I explore Arabi Malayalam literary traditions within an analytic of a Mappila literary formation, which I argue, helps us
understand better the cultural space and social production of Mappila literature. Devotional performance genres such as the *mala* are crucial to the conceptual architecture of my idea of a Mappila literary formation and therefore my focus later in the chapter remains on the *mala* genre. Building on the third chapter, the fourth chapter uses a popular Arabi Malayalam garland-song, *Muhyiddin Mala* of 1607—also the first extant Arabi Malayalam work—in order to illuminate my argument about a Mappila literary formation. Drawing on available historical and ethnographic material, I try to show how the *mala* embodies a key tradition of the Mappila literary formation: saint veneration as a prominent form of piety. I also cast light on how Arabi Malayalam—and especially *sabeena*, the Mappila prayerbook—engendered and sustained an alternative literacy movement for many Mappila men and women well into the late twentieth century.

The subject of the last two chapters is contemporary Mappila self-fashioning in which devotional performance genres such as the *mawlud* and *mala* take centre stage. In these chapters I consider in ethnographic detail the constitutive role of the *mawlud* and *mala* in producing affects of piety in Mappila selves. In other words, I examine how these genres are central to the constitution of a “good” Muslim, as the Mappilas I discuss in this dissertation would have us believe. Chapter five takes up for analysis the Mappila *mawlud* and Islamic piety in contemporary Kerala, whereas chapter six looks at how the *mala* genre works as a tool for ethical self-improvement for many Mappilas today. These ethnographic descriptions are intended not just to point up that devotional performance genres continue to have salience for Mappilas, but also to further cement a key thesis of my dissertation: for a better and more productive understanding of Mappila literary culture it is imperative to pay due attention to the social tone and life of this literary culture.
In the conclusion to this dissertation, I reiterate the need for a context-sensitive, performance-based, holistic approach to the study of Mappila literary culture. I also ruminate over some of the consequences of my arguments in this dissertation for analyzing literary cultures as well as anticipate a few of the criticisms my work might provoke. The appendix at the end of the dissertation features the texts of important *mawlud* narratives and *mala* song-poems analyzed in this study.

Inasmuch as this dissertation takes up for analysis a greatly under-studied literary culture from South India and examines that culture from a context-sensitive textual approach and a cross-disciplinary vantage point, it aims to contribute not only to the study of Mappila Muslims of Kerala but also to the larger filed of South and Southeast Asian studies.