INTRODUCTION

The Complex of Texts in Context: Understanding Mappila Literary Culture

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.

1 “Mappila,” the Malayalam word generally used to refer to the Muslim community of the present state of Kerala, is bedeviled not by a lack of etymological interpretations but by a sheer proliferation of them, which are available elsewhere (Logan 1987; Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Miller 1976). However, the most persuasive of the versions of the word’s disputed origins seems to be one that considers “Mappila” as a contraction of Maha-pilla (“big/great child,” a title of honour conferred on immigrants) or as mapilla which means “bridegroom” or “son-in-law,” a usage still very much in vogue in colloquial Malayalam and Tamil.
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 approach to the study of Mappila literary culture. Second, I want to foreground 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.

Categories such as “fanatic,” “bigoted,” “warlike people,” “religious militant” and “illiterate” have long served as the stock problematics imprisoning colonial as well as postcolonial narratives on Mappilas (Logan [1887] 1981; Fawcett 1901; Innes [1908] 1951; Hitchcock [1925] 1983; Qureshi [1977] 1985; Dale 1980; Mujeeb 1985). In the British colonial traveler Francis Buchanan’s Journey of 1800 (originally published in London in 1807) the Mappilas of the interior parts of Malabar are portrayed as “fierce, blood-thirsty, bigoted ruffians” ( [1807] 1870: 103). In the same vein, the “fanatic Mappila” predominantly colours William Logan’s grand narrative of Malabar ([1887] 1981). For F. Fawcett who identifies “civilized” and “uncivilized” followers of Islam among Mappilas, the “untutored, ardent and fanatical Muhammadans,” are “a truly strange people” whose “devotion to death” scandalizes Western, secular sensibilities (1901: 499-503). C.A. Innes ([1908] 1951) and R. H. Hitchcock ([1925] 1983) reproduce these pathologizing constructs of an “abject” Mappila who is made to stand at the limits of colonial normative discourse. While the colonial manufacturing of the figure of a
“fanatic and illiterate” Mappila was underwritten by the administrative exigencies of the British as they sought to rein in an insurgent native people (Ansari 2006).² It is unfortunate that even postcolonial Indian historians have deployed these categories as if they were some innocent, unproblematic signifiers. Thus, I. H. Qureshi has no doubt that “The Moplahs of Malabar are a warlike people” ([1977] 1985: 319; emphasis added). M. Mujeeb no more than ventriloquizizes Fawcett on Mappilas displaying an “attitude of mind in which the ordinary functions of the brain are stayed by religious ecstasy” (Mujeeb 1985: 329-30; Fawcett, 1901: 500). For his part, Stephen Dale (1980), even as he acknowledges the overdetermined character of the centuries-long Mappila violent struggles against European forces and dominant local Hindu castes since the Portuguese “discovery” of Calicut in 1498, nonetheless singles out “religious militancy” as the paradigmatic, unmistakable stamp of Mappila identity.

The Mappila insurgent attacks which culminated in the historic rebellion of 1921-22 in colonial Malabar which the British “outrageously” named the “Moplah Outrages” have come to dominate the mainstream scholarship on the Muslims of Kerala so far. As the colonial project of rendering the “Mappila outbreaks” legible within the trope of Mappila “fanaticism and obscurantism” has been challenged by Malayali historians, attempts have been made to (re)read the Malabar rebellion as an agrarian as well as anti-colonial struggle.³ However, the excessive

² In his incisive deconstruction of the colonial British production and dissemination of the figure of the “fanatic” Mappila, M. T. Ansari notes: “The ‘fanatic’ was enforced and administered into existence. (…T)his label puts together a particular kind of ‘individual,’ …and in doing so conceals the machinery of control exerted on the Mappila peasant body” (Ansari 2006, 51).
³ Marxist historian K. N. Panikkar (1989) argues that the Mappila outbreaks in nineteenth and twentieth century Malabar are best understood as agrarian conflicts whose religious motives are nothing but an aberration. K. Madhavan Nair’s memoire Malabar Kalapam (1971) offers the typical “nationalist” rendering of the rebellion. Mappila sources that interpret the rebellion as primarily an anti-British struggle for freedom include M. Alikunhi (1972); Malabar Kalapam, 1921: Samarankalum Padhanangalum (Souvenir brought out by the organizing committee for the 60th anniversary celebrations of 1921 Malabar rebellion, 1981); E. Moytu Moulavi (1981);
focus on the “rebellion” has detracted from the significance of serious scholarly engagements with the rich multiplex of Mappila socio-politico-cultural traditions. Published in 1961, P. A. Syed Muhammad’s *Kerala Muslim Charithram* (Kerala Muslim History), the first major Malayalam work by a Mappila that takes up for analysis his community’s history, does not even briefly consider the Mappila literary tradition. Perhaps, Muhammad could not have found any “history” in Mappila literature. But, as scholars have pointed out, just as historians can sometimes encounter archives with literary qualities, so can they at times work with literary texts that have archival value (Mir 2010). Also, drawing on an enormous body of literature from late medieval and early modern South India, Velcheru Narayana Rao et al (2001) have argued that history in this part of the world, in contrast to the European case, has found expression in several

and *Wagon Tragedy Smaranika* (Souvenir published by the Wgaon Tragedy 60th anniversary conference committee, 1981).

4The “formal” entry of Malabar, the northern region of Kerala in south India, into History in late nineteenth century following the publication of *Malabar*, better known as *Malabar Manual*, by British colonial administrator William Logan in 1887 is now notorious. Logan, the collector of Malabar, and later, the District Magistrate of Malabar, bemoaned the Malayali society’s lack of historical sensibilities as he could not find a “proper history” of the region and its peoples that would aid him in exercising control over the native population. In the preface to his first volume, Logan notes,

…it ought never to be forgotten that *facts*, which bulk largely in the histories of European races, are not to be expected here. …a people whose history presents few landmarks or stepping stones, so to speak—a people whose history was almost completed…*The Malayali race has produced no historians simply because there was little or no history in one sense to record.* (Logan [1887] 1981, v; emphasis added added).

In a redemptive spirit Logan embarked on a monumental project of writing the history of the Malayalis, which also sought to write Malabar into a universal master code of History tied to a secular temporality of empty, homogeneous time. Logan, it should be noted, is not alone in invoking History as a way to translate the unfamiliar into the familiar, the enchanted into the disenchanted. He simply betrays the wider colonialist tendency to condescendingly construct the colonized as “people without history” and then to insert them into History in order to render their life-worlds legible in the service of colonial administration. Cf. Rao et al 2001; Ansari 2006; Aquil and Chatterjee 2008.
genres and that historiography does not demand strict adherence to formal features and types. The best way to study a community also includes a study of the literary works produced by members of that community—especially in terms of what these works of literature do to the community that produces and is equally produced by them.

Subsequent Mappila historians have, however, devoted some space, though inadequate, to Mappila literary culture (Koya 1983; Kareem 1983; Kunju 1989). Interestingly, the first work in English that seeks to shed light on more or less all aspects of Mappila community is Roland Miller’s *The Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends* (1976). Miller affords us critical insights, albeit from a macro-level vantage point, into the socio-cultural life of Mappilas by focusing on the community’s involvement in various spheres of activity, including the literary. More recently, L. R. S. Lakshmi (2012), despite her titular promise of a “different perspective,” completely fails to take the opportunity to undertake any substantive analysis of the Mappila literary tradition in her account of the Malabar Muslims.

By using “literary culture” rather than the more familiar “literary history,” I want to cast into deep relief a refreshing angle of vision that eludes the prevailing paradigms in contemporary studies of Mappila literature. The dominant model of “doing” Mappila literature has been an abstract formalism tempered with an equally abstract ideologism that reduces the literary to cultural artifacts that are quarantined from people’s daily life. In other words, this approach, which I call “literarization,” 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). Literarization has its precedent in the pioneering survey of the Mappila literary tradition *Mahathaya Mappila Sahitya Parambaryam* by the two Mappilas C. N. Ahmad Moulavi and K. K. Abdul Kareem (1978; for subsequent writers who
honour the norm set by Moulavi and Kareem, see Vallikkunnu 1999, 2008; see chapter one for a detailed discussion of this point). The notion of “literary culture,” as articulated by Sheldon Pollock (2000, 2003), serves as a handy segue into my examination of the Mappila literary formation in this dissertation (see chapters three and four). Literary culture, on this view, signifies people’s ways of “do(ing) things with texts: writing, reciting, reading, copying, printing, and circulating texts” (Pollock 2000, 593). Therefore, it is important to try to apprehend what literary texts mean to people who compose, hear, see, read or sing them (Pollock 2003), and, if I may add, what texts do to them, as well as how these meanings and workings may change over time. These texts could well be expressive, discursive, or political (Pollock 2000, 593), but it is the first kind that is most pertinent to what I describe as the Mappila literary formation. The practices that make up literary cultures as noted above are practices of attachment that bear on people’s ways of being and acting in, and on, the world.

Apart from literarization, other related reductionist lenses through which Mappila literature has been hitherto examined are “folklorization” and “cultural syncretism.” Syncretism is well known as a rubric of multidisciplinary use to characterize and examine cultural and religious exchange, interaction, and mixture (Mir 2006). This potted rubric has no less informed contemporary scholarship on aspects of Mappila Muslim culture, including the literary (Cf. Kunhi 1982; Harris 1995). As for “folklorization,” I deploy the term in its two different senses. 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. This characterizes the truncated picture of Mappila songs painted in the larger work on the history of Malayalam literature (Cf. Iyer 1957; Paniker 1977; Leelavathy 1980). Second, drawing on Saba Mahmood in a different context (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. This sense meshes comfortably with the literarization and objectification of Mappila literary culture that I have mentioned above. I will return to these issues in chapter one.

It is the devotional performance narratives of Mappila literary culture that have borne the brunt of the epistemic violence unleashed by these interpretive grids currently afloat in Mappila literary studies. In this dissertation I want to recuperate those aspects of Mappila literature that have performative value and have been glaringly overlooked or distorted in prevalent research and scholarship by viewing the performative as an ineluctable part of Mappila literary culture in all its richness and multiplexity. This in turn allows us to appreciate better the rich tapestry of sociality that forms Mappila lifescape that is visibly invisible in the existing accounts of the Mappila community. Admittedly, M. M. Bakhtin’s “sociological poetics” has inspired my attempt to capture the social production and life of Mappila literary culture (Bakhtin 1981). Also central to the analytic in the essay is the notion of text or genre as practice rather than as idea and its proactive relation to context (Hanks 1989; Freeman 2003). This notion helps us to conceptualize text or genre not as merely expressive of an always already surround or locus, but as equally constitutive of contexts and cultural formations.

A Note on Research Methods and Methodologies

Though the terms “method” and “methodology” are sometimes used interchangeably, in my work I am sensitive to the nuances of these terms. Thus, by a research method, I mean a particular way of carrying out one’s research. Examples are textual analysis, discourse analysis, archival research, oral history, ethnographic/field research, etc. I use methodology to signify any perspective or vantage point that the researcher brings to bear upon his inquiry or analysis. For example, formalism, feminism/s, Marxism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, new historicism, and so on. Needless to say, one can always make use of a combination of methods and methodologies to conduct one’s research. See Griffin 2005.
Adopting a context-oriented, performance-based approach, I examine the performative aspects of devotional performance genres in Mappila literary culture. The two devotional genres I study are the mawlid (mawlid in standard Arabic) and the mala. The former mixes prose and verse in a narrative written in Arabic that celebrates the birth and life of the Prophet Muhammad. The latter is Arabi Malayalam praise song to revered Islamic personalities such as the Prophet, and, most commonly, the Sufi figure. The performative aspects I have in mind include mainly the composition, singing and recitation, and circulation of the devotional narratives in question. It may be noted that a context-oriented approach is not a turn away from texts: my problem is with the notion of a decontextualized text. Thus, I feel that the study of Mappila literary culture should not degenerate into a type of crass textual formalism, but neither can it proceed without harnessing the full force of narrative. In other words, while studying any performative tradition, it is important to analyze how the text is performed, how the performance affects the text, and equally important, how the text affects its own performance—more so when the performative tradition in question inhabits a liminal space, i.e. note quite oral, not quite inscribed, but partaking of both.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) See Bauman and Sherzer 1975; Bauman 1986; Goody 1987; and Boyarin 1993. In his study of the Tamil bow song tradition, Blackburn 1988 critiques an event-centred approach to performance traditions and adopts a text-centred approach by discussing how bow songs structure their own singing. It seems to me that it is advisable to try to merge these two approaches as far as possible while guarding against the excesses of both, although it may be indeed that a researcher emphasizes one of the two approaches over the other in any given analysis, depending on what she seeks to foreground in her study. Consequently, I emphasize a context-sensitive (textual) approach—because I wonder if there is text without context and context without text—to the study of Mappila literary culture in order to reclaim the performative aspects of this culture that are obscured from view by extant scholarship.
My method of analysis will combine both history and ethnography.7 A historical account affords us enough specificity about the practices of Mappila literary culture, while ethnography can help cast light on the sociality of a community of people, unravel the many ways in which men and women make and remake their lifeworlds, and learn about and from diverse modes of human flourishing on earth.8 I take ethnography to mean a mode of research conducted in a natural setting. The ethnographer finds out about other (and/or their own) cultures, or features of a culture, by spending an extended period of time in the ‘field,’ participating and observing in all or certain relevant aspects of social life. While participant observation is central to ethnography, this method of research can be supplemented by interviews, document analysis, consideration of literary texts, magazines, photography, even the analysis of statistical information if found to be relevant, although ethnographic research does tend to favour qualitative research over quantitative (Alsop 2005). Though scholarly consensus eludes the question as to what makes a project researching cultural behaviour distinctively ethnographic, Rachel Alsop suggests that there is some unanimity of opinion on the fact that the depth and length of engagement with the subject matter, of the ‘ethnographer’s immersion in the ‘field’ remains the defining feature of an ethnographic research method (Alsop 2005, 115).

I conducted intermittent field research over a period of five years from 2010 to 2014 in various Muslim-majority towns and villages of Malappuram district in present-day southern

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8 For the term “human flourishing,” I am indebted to the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. See MacIntyre 1984, 152.
Kerala. Field work was mainly interrupted for a period of ten months in 2013-14 by a Fulbright doctoral research fellowship at the University of California at Berkeley, CA. I attended various mawlud ceremonies, observed and participated in mala recitals, interviewed—and engaged in short as well as long-winded conversations with—many Mappila men who valued devotional performance genres such as the mawlud and mala. Also, with the generous help of a female research assistant, I had access, however limited, to Mappila women’s devotional life in which the mawlud and mala figure predominantly. Finally, like the icing on the cake, I could also benefit from auto-ethnographic insights, coming as they do out of my own personal entanglement with the Mappila devotional performance genres that I seek to study in the following pages. All ethnographies are written—but in this case, written in a double sense.\(^9\)

While I have tried to write an ethnography, albeit fragmentary, of devotional narratives within Mappila literary culture, these narratives—and the Mappila prayer book called sabeena—can themselves be considered as written records or representations of devotional practice, or “archives” of devotional/cultural practice if you like.

At any rate, I draw on history to show the specificity of a Mappila literary formation that has been forged by the practices of Mappilas producing, copying, reading, singing, and disseminating literary texts, Arabi Malayalam devotional performance narratives in particular. I mobilize ethnographic material and field notes in order to thicken the description of what I call the Mappila literary formation—of the social life of Mappila literary culture—to illuminate the continued salience of this formation for contemporary Mappilas, and, more specifically, to demonstrate the constitutive role of devotional performance genres such as the mawlud and mala in the self-fashioning of many Mappila men and women today. I am of course offering broad

\(^9\) This is an insight from Reinburg 2012.
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.

**An Emphasis on Disciplinary Strengths, Not Barriers**

Needless to say, my explorations into Mappila literary culture straddle disciplinary boundaries and affiliations. Although I study and analyze literary narratives in Arabic and Arabi Malayalam from a south Indian region, my concerns in this dissertation go well beyond churning out an appreciation note on Mappila literature. In examining the social life of Mappila literary culture, I have come to see the entanglement of the literary in historical, cultural, and religious fields of human existence. Therefore, it is quite natural for a study like this to partake of such discourses as history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and religious studies. To mark this eclectic character of my study, I would call it a project in comparative literary and cultural studies, which I take to be part of what I understand by critical humanities.

As a *multi*-disciplinary, *cross*-cultural, and *trans*-national endeavour, comparative literature studies the connections, intersections, conjunctures, differences, points of convergence and divergence between literary cultures and traditions in all their richness and complexity across national, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. The origins of the discipline have often been attributed to Goethe’s coining of the term *Weltliteratur* (German, “World Literature”) in 1827. However, there are scholars who see the disciplinary formation of comparative literature with an institutional presence as a product of the Cold War (Behdad and Thomas 2011). Some scholars have also pointed to the Eurocentrism, elitism and nation orientation that have
traditionally characterized the discipline in Euro-America (de Zepetnek and Vasvari 2013). For all these particularities of the discipline, comparative literature remains useful as a dynamic and plural field of study that allows one the freedom to approach literary cultures from a broad range of theoretical assumptions, critical methodologies, and disciplinary orientations. The comparison need not always necessarily be between A and B, whatever that may mean (two languages, two textual traditions, two literary cultures, two authors, etc. – each understood as two discrete entities). Often, it is not only possible, but useful, to analyze and explore one single literary tradition from a comparative perspective by trying to apprehend the in-texts, inter-texts, co-texts, contexts, counter-texts, and even after-texts which constitute that tradition. It is with such a conviction that I work through the Mappila literary culture in this dissertation.

Although the discipline of comparative literature as we know it today emerged in nineteenth century Euro-America and is not without its own politico-cultural moorings, it would be a mistake to assume that the perspective of comparison did not exist before in any other part of the world. In fact, the idea of comparison has been basic to Indian literary cultures from their very inception—long before globalization of literary studies witnessed the institutionalization of comparative literature in Indian universities from the twentieth century onwards. Many hybrid linguistic and literary cultures flourished in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. The Sanskrit and Arabic cosmopoleis of South and Southeast Asia are examples to illustrate this fact (Pollock 2009; Ricci 2011). The Arabi Malayalam literary tradition that I am examining in this study itself is an interesting case to demonstrate the inherently comparatist, intertextual, and co-productive character of literary cultures of India. Thus, it becomes all the more important to appreciate such cultures of literature from a cross-disciplinary approach that is sensitive to the polyphonic and multi-dimensional/directional nature of those cultures.
A quick word on the field of cultural studies may be in order. Cultural studies could be best understood as a discursive endeavour that seeks to study and analyze a broad range of cultural signifying systems—literature being just one of them—from diverse theoretical approaches and methodologies in critical humanities and social sciences. Cultural studies offers refreshing analytics with which to study literary cultures and need not be taken as neatly isolable from comparative literary studies. They both share in their theoretical heterogeneity and plurality, and the flexibility of their borders, thereby allowing for a substantial amount of traffic back and forth between them. It may also be noted that in an attempt to make the best of the fields of comparative literature and cultural studies, a new concept of “comparative cultural studies” has been developed since the late 1980s (de Zepetnek and Vasvari 2013). In (comparative) cultural studies culture is studied both in parts (literature and other arts, popular culture, mass media, architecture, and so on) and as a whole vis-à-vis other modes of human expression and activity, as well as vis-à-vis other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. In fact, inasmuch as literary studies are also part of cultural studies, it is worthwhile to

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10 It is often said that one difference between comparative literature and cultural studies is that while the former does not profess an ideological orientation, the latter presents itself as explicitly ideological (de Zepetnek and Vasvari 2013). I, however, doubt if a comparative literary project, or any discourse for that matter, can be immune to any political, ideological motives. In other words, is there such thing as apolitical and disinterested knowledge? See Foucault 1980.

11 Culture has not been an easy term to define, despite the fact that it saturates our everyday speech so overwhelmingly. In his Keywords Raymond Williams points up three modern senses of the word culture: 1) “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”; 2) “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general”; 3) and “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (Williams 1985, 90). This shows the range and overlap of meanings the word culture embodies. As Williams further states, “The complex of senses indicates a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence” (Williams 1985, 91). One or more of these senses may be referred to in a given discipline or field of inquiry, but it is important to be sensitive to the ways in which all these senses of the word relate to and interact with one another.
view cultural studies as a set of analytical frames or interpretive grids that a literary person can bring to bear upon his/her analysis of literary cultures in order to capture their significance as socio-cultural artifacts and practices as fully as possible.

I am aware that I have undertaken this multi-disciplinary research project in comparative literary and cultural studies within the enabling constraints of an English literature department at a public Indian university. Although inter-/multi-/cross-disciplinarity is highly appreciated in contemporary research agendas not just in English studies but in disciplines across the social sciences and humanities, reactionary voices from across the spectrum are refusing to die out. While living with my research problem over a period of five years as a research scholar in the Department of English Literature at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad (henceforth, EFLU), I have been often asked—by people who otherwise admire my research topic—this million-dollar question: What is your contribution to English Literature? This question can have many sub-texts, often with an air of condescension: for example, studying as you do the devotional performance genres of Mappila Muslims of Kerala—works composed in Arabic and Arabi Malayalam—you look like a misfit in the Department of English Literature. While I have no intention to go on the defensive by trying to prove my disciplinary allegiance to English Literature, I nonetheless see this question as an opportunity to think through, and engage, in a preliminary way a rich set of questions about what it means to do English studies in India.

First of all, what is English about English studies in India? English is now a confusing descriptive or organizing term for literary/cultural studies in India, as elsewhere in the world—it is not an unequivocal term with a determinate signified as reactionary forces would have us
believe.\textsuperscript{12} English studies, arguably one of the strongest and most traditional disciplines in the humanities, has long lost its sense of coherence as the study of British/American literatures, or of literatures in the Anglophone territories. Even as the field has been defined less by national boundaries than by a language, in which authors from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds express themselves, English studies now has moved away from a narrow focus on literature per se in the remarkable attention it pays to a range of cultural forms, thereby transforming itself into a de facto centre for cultural studies, too. Accordingly, in the context of India, the definitional latitude of \textit{English} has to be expanded to include the study of various Indian literatures and cultures. Similarly, the importance of exploiting the critical apparatuses of English literary studies and the possibilities of the English language in order to explore the greatly understudied literary traditions of our country cannot be overrated. English translations and interpretations of indigenous literary traditions are crucial to bringing these traditions to the limelight of international critical attention. Doing so is not simply in the interests of the indigenous literary cultures: it also helps broaden the disciplinary horizons of our field of study, i.e. English. However, this does not mean that one should abandon studying Chaucer, Shakespeare or Milton, or the literatures produced in the English-speaking world, that close reading of English literary texts should be suppressed. The point is that we may continue this tradition much more vibrantly, while at the same time we also leave room open for the study of indigenous cultures which will enrich, and will be enriched by, the area of English studies.

\textsuperscript{12} In his insightful article titled “Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English,” Paul Jay argues that the future of English as an academic discipline lies at the conjunction of cultural studies and globalized literary studies—studying literature and culture beyond “the restrictive and distorting borders of nation-states” (Jay 2011, 44).
Second, as a matter of fact the English department is still the platform in many Indian universities for doing interdisciplinary studies such as translation studies, film studies, culture studies, etc. In fact, cultural studies began as the outcrop of an English department—the very origins of this field of inquiry in the 1950s lie in the work of two British writers, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, who emerged out of the academic study of English literature (Green 1996). It may be recalled that in a remarkable development in the pioneering and institutionalization of cultural studies as an academic discipline, Hoggart founded the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964 while being Professor of English at Birmingham University. No wonder, then, if practitioners of English studies veer onto comparative literary and cultural studies. Put another way, comparative literature and cultural studies need not be considered extraneous and extrinsic to the field of English studies, as they have their own originary moorings that tie them to an English department. At any rate, the increasingly ambiguous concept of English suggests that there is more to contemporary English studies than mere English in a narrow sense of the term.

Incidentally, as I write this introduction, EFLU has modified the nomenclature of its school offering undergraduate and graduate degree programmes in literary studies in English. Until recently, the school was called the “School of English Literary Studies” and it included departments of English literature, Commonwealth literature, American and Caribbean literatures, and literary theory and criticism. In 2013 the last three departments were merged to form what is

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13 See The Uses of Literacy by Hoggart (first appeared in 1957) and Culture and Society by Williams (first published in 1958).
14 My argument is not that English literature as an academic discipline has exhausted itself or reached a saturation point, and hence the future of the discipline cries for newer pastures of inquiry. All that I want to say is that the practice of the discipline should be sensitive to, and cannot ignore, its local situatedness and that in what is to be a mutually beneficial exercise local literary cultures should find a place in the disciplinary agendas of English studies in India.
currently known as the Department of Indian and World Literatures. More recently, the qualifier English has got the sack and the school is now renamed the “School of Literary Studies.” It now features new departments of study such as comparative literature and India studies, and translation studies, which hitherto used to be part of the School of Interdisciplinary Studies hosting such departments as cultural studies, film studies, philosophy and aesthetics, social exclusion studies, and so forth. Apart from the institutional, administrative contingencies that might have been involved in this development, I want to view the change of nomenclature as suggestive of a growing realization among the practitioners that as an academic discipline, literary studies in India cannot take English literature alone as their raison d'être and that a great variety of (underexplored) indigenous, regional literary traditions and cultures, including textual traditions and song cultures, that flourished and are still flourishing in the country ought to be placed at par, if not high, on the agenda of English/literary studies in India. It is heartening to see such a diversification of interests and concerns already animating research projects being carried out in the Department of English Literature at EFLU, with research scholars producing fascinating and intriguing work on various aspects of Indian literary cultures, including the song cultures of various communities of India. The ongoing work by researchers at the department on “mnemocultures” (cultures of memory) belonging to myriad jatis (“bio-cultural formations”) in India is a case in point. My own work, in a different way, has emerged in these interstices of the Department of English Literature at EFLU—the interstices engendered by an inevitable rethinking of the contours of English studies in India, as elsewhere in the world.

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15 For details, visit [www.efluniversity.ac.in/Academics.html#](http://www.efluniversity.ac.in/Academics.html#).
16 For a study (by an EFLU professor of English Literature) of mnemocultures in South Asia with an emphasis on the Telugu tradition, see Rao 2014.
CHAPTER ONE

Studies in Mappila Literary Culture: The Epistemic Violence of the Looking Glass

The aim of this chapter is to offer a critical review of the approaches that have hitherto shaped studies in Mappila literary culture and to put into perspective the analytics animating my investigation in this dissertation into the performative aspects of devotional performance genres in the Mappila literary tradition. By using “literary culture / tradition” rather than the more familiar “literary history” or “history of literature” I want to bring into sharp relief a refreshing angle of vision that eludes prevailing paradigms in contemporary studies of Mappila literature.\textsuperscript{17}

The dominant paradigm of “doing” Mappila literature, as I shall demonstrate presently, has been an abstract formalism tempered with an equally abstract ideologism that reduces the literary to

\textsuperscript{17} One can literally shelter all works of literature in Arabic and Arabi Malayalam written by and/or about Mappilas under the umbrella term “Mappila literature.” It is in this broader sense that I use the term throughout this dissertation. I specify the language of the works in question, i.e. Arabic or Arabi Malayalam, whenever necessary. For a brief discussion of the possible definitions of “Mappila literature,” see Vallikkunnu 1999, 17-18. Also, I am aware that there are Malayali researchers who object to the very nomenclature “Mappila literature.” The argument is that the qualifier “Mappila” is a politically motivated, exclusionary label that seeks to ghettoize the Mappila literary traditions and \textit{abjectifies} them as the deviant outside of a larger, normative literary culture of Malayalis, and that in deploying [and continuing to deploy] this label we are guilty of complicity in the exclusionary practices that this label entails (A. Nujum, personal communication, dated 30 November 2014; see also Nujum 2015). While I am entirely with these researchers in their advocacy of the need for an understanding and engaging of Mappila literary traditions within the larger literary cultures of the Malayali society, I still think that this important exercise is possible while retaining the label “Mappila,” and, more importantly for the purposes of my inquiry in this dissertation, that the adjective “Mappila” is useful as a \textit{descriptive} category in drawing attention to the particularities—cultural, linguistic, thematic, stylistic, and so on—of the Mappila literary culture of South India.
cultural artifacts that are quarantined from people’s daily life. In other words, this approach is blind to the social production of a literary culture that both fashions and is fashioned by its community. The notion of “literary culture,” as has been forcefully articulated by Sheldon Pollock (2000, 2003), serves as a handy segue into my examination of the Mappila literary traditions below. Literary culture, on this view, signifies people’s ways of “do(ing) things with texts: writing, reciting, reading, copying, printing, and circulating texts” (Pollock 2000: 593). Therefore, it is important to try to understand what literary texts mean to people who compose, hear, see, read or sing them and how these meanings may change over time (Pollock 2003: 14). These texts could well be expressive, discursive, or political (Pollock 2000: 593), but it is the first kind that is most pertinent to my explorations into Mappila literary culture. The practices that make up literary cultures as noted above are practices of attachment that bear on people’s ways of being and acting in the world.

Devotional Genres and Scholarly Distaste: A Brief Survey

Let me review the existing scholarship on Mappila literature to map its inadequate approaches to the object of its inquiry and to see why it is necessary to draw up a different standpoint from which to deal with the subject. It was O. Abu who first sought to undertake a detailed study of the Mappila literary tradition. His *Arabi Malayala Sahitya Charithram* (History of Arabi Malayalam Literature), published in 1970, provides valuable information on the linguistic and literary traditions of Mappilas. Abu’s passion for his subject is remarkable as is his commitment to establishing Arabi Malayalam as a language in its own right rather than a form of Malayalam
merely clothed in the Arabic script. Most significantly, he is sensitive to the performative
dimensions of devotional performance genres in Arabi Malayalam such as the “mala” genre of
devotional ballads. Yet, he is unable to do justice to this important aspect of Mappila literature
within the limited scope of his history as his main focus remains a preoccupation with the status
of Arabi Malayalam and its literature as a distinct tradition that is irreducible to Malayalam.

The next important work in the area, far exceeding Abu’s in scope and range, is
Mahathaya Mappila Sahitya Parambaryam (The Great Mappila Literary Tradition), written and
published by two “proud” Mappilas, C. N. Ahmad Moulavi and K. K. Muhammad Abdul
Kareem, in 1978. This grand narrative on Mappila literature, which the authors have ventured in
order to make Mappilas themselves feel “proud” of the illustrious cultural heritage of the
community—hence also my characterization of the authors as “‘proud’ Mappilas” (iii-v),
introduces readers to the rich world of Mappila literary production with information, however
patchy, on the life and work of many Mappila writers who are seldom discussed. The work is
descriptive at best and fragmentary at worst, though. Notwithstanding their work’s pioneering
status in contemporary Mappila literary studies, Moulavi and Kareem are totally insensitive to
the performative aspects of Mappila devotional narratives such as the mawlid and mala.

Mawlids, better known as mawlud in Mappila parlance, are Arabic laudatory narratives in
prose and verse celebrating the birth and life of the Prophet Muhammad and other revered
Islamic personalities. Malas are devotional ballads in Arabi Malayalam that extol the virtues of
Sufi figures or other objects of veneration or glorify important events in the history of Islam.

The performance of these genres has been central to devotional piety in Keralite Islam and even

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18 See my discussion of the mawlud in chapters two and five.
19 For more on the mala genre, see chapter three.
colonial administrators have not failed to observe and document, albeit sketchily, the mawlid and mala traditions among Mappilas (Logan [1887] 1981; Fawcett 1901; Innes [1908] 1951). Miller (1976) also throws some light on this aspect of Mappila life. Yet, one does not encounter even an acknowledgement of the mawlid tradition in Moulavi and Kareem’s otherwise invaluable survey of Mappila literary culture. As for the mala, Moulavi and Kareem discuss it halfheartedly without appreciating, or wanting to appreciate, as it were, the performative value of this genre.

The duo’s discomfort and love-hate relationship with the Mappila devotional performance narratives stands out in their discussion of the earliest extant Arabi Malayalam work Muhyiddin Mala composed by Qadi Muhammad of Calicut (d. 1616) in 1607. This work, the glowing achievement of Mappila literary culture, has virtually become a reference point for the whole pageantry of Mappila literature. I am taking up this text and its performative status in the chapters that follow, where I consider Arabi Malayalam vis-à-vis a literary formation of Mappilas and provide ethnographic insights into the role of devotional performance genres in contemporary Mappila self-fashioning (see, especially, chapters four and six). Moulavi and Kareem acknowledge the beauty and artistic merit of this mala when they say: “However, only a born poet can write such a simple, yet exquisite, poem. Its artistic value is exceedingly high!”(1978, 153). Thus, the duo set a well-honored precedent for the subsequent “literarization” of this mala and similar poems that followed in its wake without feeling the need to engage their performative merit. Moulavi and Kareem themselves are not unaware of this underlying feature of Muhyiddin Mala:

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

Yet, throughout their discussion of the *mala*, the duo betray their dis-ease with its content and consequently arrogate to themselves the burden of proving the incompatibility of this text and its recitative use with their version of “pure” Islam.

*Muhyiddin Mala* lavishes praise on the object of its veneration, Shaikh Abdul Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166-67), the founder of the Qadiri Sufi order. By cherry-picking lines of extreme veneration from the text, Moulavi and Kareem embark on the task of declaring *Muhyiddin Mala* un-Islamic: “But, the Quran will never allow one to accept the ideas that this short poem contains” (1978, 153). Referring to such lines of the *mala* that fervently depict the miracles due to al-Jilani and enjoin pious Muslims to enter the Qadiri order, among other things, the duo pass the judgment that such lines “run counter to monotheism, the bedrock of Islam, as well as to the fundamental teachings of the Quran.” (154). These religious edicts unequivocally reveal that both Moulavi and Kareem represent the so-called “reformist” stream in Keralite Islam that draws its sustenance from an antagonistic relationship to Sufi-inspired “traditional” Islamic practices such as saint veneration and shrine visitation.20 That said, it is these devotional practices that are integral to the Mappila literary formation I examine in this dissertation. My interest here is not in

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20 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 *mawlid*, saint veneration, and shrine visitation (Miller 1976, 2007; Kutty, 1995, 69-72). For an overview of Islamic groups in Kerala, see Miller (1976) and Samad (1998). For a detailed commentary on *Muhyiddin Mala* from the “traditional” Keralite “Sunni” Muslim perspective, see Faizy 2002.
the religious legitimacy of these devotional practices, however. The point I want to make is that both Moulavi and Kareem operate within a particular semiotic ideology of “Islamicness” that forecloses any appreciation of the performative dimensions of Mappila devotional literature and their repeated claims in their book to “objectivity” and “dispassionate treatment” of their subject matter are belied by their marked indifference to the mawlu and mala as devotional genres (Moulavi and Kareem 1978, 81; idem, 90). Consequently, they can only marvel at the aesthetic qualities of these works of literature, stopping short of engaging the performative world of this literary culture as if the literary and the performative were polar opposites.

K. O. Shamsuddin’s Mappila Malayalam: Oru Bhasha Mishritham (Mappila Malayalam: A Language Mixture) was also published in 1978. As the title shows, it is mainly a metalinguistic treatise that analyses Arabi Malayalam with special reference to its unique features as a hybridized vernacular. Another notable development in Mappila literary studies is P. K. Muhammad Kunhi’s Muslimsinkalum Kerala Sanskaravum (Muslims and Kerala Culture, published in 1982) which locates Mappila literature within a wider Malayali cultural milieu. Kunhi values the literary features of Mappila devotional genres such as the mala. Yet, he uncritically takes Moulavi and Kareem’s “Islamic puritanism” as normative and further vitiates his treatment of Mappila devotional literature by anchoring it within the flawed trope of “cultural syncretism.” He makes a strained attempt to suggest an overwhelming “Hindu” influence in Mappila devotional ballads: “They (the mala songs) chiefly show the influence of Hindu

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21 I owe the term “semiotic ideology” to the anthropologist Webb Keane (2003, 2007). By semiotic ideology, he means “basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world” (Keane 2003, 419). For Keane’s explication of his idea of “semiotic ideology,” also see Keane 2007, especially pp. 16-21. By the semiotic ideology of “Islamicness,” I mean the many ways in which language and other signifying systems come to form, de-form and/or re-form what is correct Islamic practice and what is not. Also see Keane 1997.
customs” (1982, 232-33). His contention that the *mala* conventions such as invocations at the
beginning and liturgical prayers at the end take inspiration from Hindu devotional songs can only
be spurious as we can see such conventions in Arabic-Islamic poetry for which *mawlids* are the
best case in point.  

Kerala itself takes pride in a rich tradition of Arabic panegyric literature due to Muslims
that antedates Muhyiddin Mala of the early 17th century (Hudawi 2014a). Even the author of
Muhyiddin Mala has written poems in Arabic, including the famous anti-Portuguese historical
narrative *Fathul Mubeen* (The Obvious Victory), which testifies to the fact that he is immersed
in the conventions of Arabic-Islamic poetry where invocations and litany are not uncommon
(Kareem 1982). *Fathul Mubeen* itself begins and ends with customary Islamic invocations and
prayers. On Kunhi’s view, Muslim devotional literature is nothing but a pale shadow of Hindu
*bhakti* literature. It is important to be sensitive to the cultural give and take that characterizes
communities which live together in both mutual interaction and friction. But it would be a
mistake to reduce one to the other, their shared cultural features notwithstanding. Kunhi’s
attempt in the section of his book under the rubric “Assimilated Customs” to present Sufi-
inspired practices among the Mappilas such as shrine visitation and saint veneration as a parody
of local Hindu devotion borders on a desperate urge to pass off “Islam in Kerala” as more
remains that on several occasions Sufis have defended themselves against criticisms by pivoting
their ways and practices not on particular local cultural milieu in which they have found

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22 For a critical study of mawlid narratives, see Katz (2007); for an examination of renowned
Arabic praise poems to the Prophet Muhammad, see Stetkevych 2010; Hudawi (2014a) offers a
brief critical overview of the Keralite tradition of Arabic laudatory poetry in honor of the Prophet
Muhammad.
themselves, but on the foundational texts and juridical principles of Islam as is the case with their detractors within the Islamic tradition (Eaton 1978). For example, Qadi Muhammad, the author of *Muhyiddin Mala* and himself a leading exponent of the Qadiri Sufi order, affirms the authenticity of his *mala* by citing relevant Islamic literature as the source of his narrative poem:

> In the poems he (al-Jilani) sang, and the books of Bahja and Takmila

(Have I found the material for this garland.)

It is through this kind of Islamic citational practices that Muslims have often sought to address and resolve the legitimacy of such practices within the Islamic tradition that live a controversial existence. In fact, in advocating a syncretic Islam in Kerala, Kunhi is not inventing any novel line of inquiry: he is simply reproducing the tendency among many scholars of South Asian Islam who employ the rubric “cultural syncretism” to analyze “lived Islam”. This tendency, enthusiastically championed by the Indian sociologist Imtiaz Ahmad (1973, 1976, 1981), has been called into question by historians, including Francis Robinson (1983). I return to this point later in this chapter.

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23 *Muhyiddin Mala*, lines, 29-30. Qadi Muhammad says that he has based his *mala* on the poems written by al-Jilani himself (some of these poems are appended to al-Jilani’s work “*Futuhul Ghayb*”, literally “the Revelations of the Unseen,” which contains eighty discourses), *Bahjathul Asrar wa Ma’din al-Anwar* (The Splendor of Secrets and the Mine of Light), a biography of al-Jilani authored by his arch disciple Ali ibn Yusuf Shathanufi (d. 1314), and *Takmila* (Supplement) which refers to a section titled *Takmilathun fi Dikri Waswayahu* (Supplementary Note on His Commandments), copied onto the end of al-Jilani’s work *Futuhul Ghayb* by his son Abdul Razaq (d. 1235); See Faizy 2002. The important point to be born in mind is that Qadi Muhammad, despite his *mala*’s local flavor and its resemblance to both Arabic and Dravidian metrics, links his works to the tradition of Islamic literature that thematizes the exemplary status of Sufi figures.
In contrast to Moulavi and Kareem’s religiously motivated “literarization” and Kunhi’s “cultural syncretism,” Balakrishnan Vallikkunnu (1999, 2008) focuses his attention on mapping the emergence of Mappila literary culture against the social development of Mappilas in the larger Malayali society. He places Mappila literature within the larger tradition of the subaltern literary cultures in Kerala that stand in opposition to the aesthetic ethos of an elite, Aryanized current in Malayali literature, without, however, losing sight of the formative role of Mappila literary tradition in the constitution of a Mappila identity (Vallikkunnu 1999). By discussing the thematic concerns, and stylistic and metrical features of Mappila songs, with special reference to Muhyiddin Mala, Vallikkunnu argues that Arabi Malayalam literature could be best appreciated as a “parallel aesthetic movement” (1999, 44-58). Be that as it may, he does not move out of a provincialized sense of the “literary” in order to extend his analysis to the performative dimensions of Arabi Malayalam literature.

Mappila Literature in the Literary Cultures of Kerala: The Constitutive Outside of the Norm?

It would not be out of place here to take stock of the position of Mappila literary tradition vis-à-vis the broader Malayali literary cultures. Though Mappila scholars have long asserted the contributions of Arabi Malayalam to the growth and development of modern Malayalam language and literature (Kunhi 1882; Kareem 1983), Mappila literature is virtually off the map of Kerala’s larger, historico-cultural studies. There is no substantive treatment of the Mappila literary culture in any of the monographs on the history of Malayalam literature. Some of this
historical scholarship acknowledges the existence of a Mappila tradition of doing literature that
could be mapped onto a history of Malayalam literature, but offers little more than broad
brushstrokes on the subject. It was the Malayalam poet Ulloor S. Parameswaran Iyer (d. 1949)
who first dropped a mention of Mappila songs in a history of Malayalam literature. His five-
volume *Kerala Sahitya Charithram* (History of Kerala Literature), posthumously published in
1957, has only one short paragraph on Mappila songs which in turn have been subsumed under a
misleading taxon of “folk songs” (v. 1, 228-229). While some Mappila songs share such features
of folk songs as oral composition and anonymous authorship (Moulavi and Kareem 1978;
Karasseri 1987), using some potted category like “folk songs” to analyze Mappila songs yields
lopsided perspective (Karasseri 1987). Moreover, the very boundaries separating the written
from the spoken, literature from orature are all the more porous (Bauman and Sherzer 1975;
Goody 1987; Boyarin 1993; Yandell 2014), and the performance genres central to my idea of a
Mappila literary formation resist any attempt at an abstract “folklorization” and an equally
abstract “literarization”. His epistemological trap notwithstanding, Ulloor’s acknowledgement,
however inadequate, of the Mappila literary tradition comparable to other cultures of Malayalam
literature has not been picked up and pursued at length by subsequent historians and critics of
Malayalam literature. As Vallikkunnu (1983, 6) notes, this studied scholarly neglect of the
subject owes to a general tendency among the mainstream Malayali literati to look down upon
the literary traditions of the lower sections of society, including the “polluting” castes, that do
not fit into upper-caste, “Aryanized” aesthetic assumptions.

Krishna Chaitanya who brought out his *History of Malayalam Literature* in 1971 briefly
discusses Arabi Malayalam literature in the chapter titled “The Christian and Muslim
Contributions” (195-211). He starts by emphasizing the distinctive nature of Christian and
Muslim communities in relation to the larger Malayali Hindu society, then proceeds to disapprove of Kerala Muslims’ traditional literacy practices involving Arabic and Arabi Malayalam, notes their belated entry into “modern education,” and finally describes Arabi Malayalam as a “hermetic tradition” because of its use of the Arabic script and a pastiche of words from Malayalam, Arabic, Urdu and Tamil (195-98, emphasis added). Needless to remark, Chaitanya’s treatment of the subject leaves much to be desired. Also, in his Short History of Malayalam Literature published in 1977, K. Ayyappa Paniker recognizes the importance of Mappila literature, but nonetheless does so by repeating Ulloor’s epistemic violence in invoking the category “folk” to conceptualize the tradition of Mappila songs (1977, 8). Likewise, M. Leelavathy (1980) explains Mappila songs in one little sentence under the genre “folk songs” in her Malayala Kavitha Sahitya Charithram (History of Malayalam Poetry): “Folk songs of Northern Kerala also consists of certain Mappila songs such as Badr Pattu” (32).24 In recent times, Rich Freeman (1998, 2003), an anthropologist of South Asian religions, has provided refreshing insights into the literary culture of pre-modern Kerala through what he characterizes as “anthropological reflection on the social and pragmatic contexts in which those genres of textual practices we today call Malayalam literature were apparently produced” (Freeman 2003, 437). However, Freeman has failed to notice the parallel roads to literary production in Kerala society such as the one made possible by Arabi Malayalam, despite his focus on Manipravalam, a mixed language resulting from the union of Bhasha (or what is retrospectively called Malayalam) and Sanskrit.

24 The most popular Badr Pattu is the battle song commemorating the famous battle of Badr in the early history of Islam, written by the greatest of Mappila poets, Moyin Kutty Vaidyar (d. 1892). Fawcett (1901) has a description of this Mappila song in his uncritical expository note on Mappila “war songs.”
The Burden of Interpretive Grids: “Literarization,” “Folklorization,” “Puritanism,” and “Syncretism”

It now becomes crystallized that “literarization,” “folklorization,” “religious puritanism,” and “cultural syncretism” have come to determine the course and direction of Mappila literary studies so far. These categories, needless to say, are by no means mutually exclusive. Neither are they reducible to one another. By “literarization” I mean an exclusive focus on “literariness”—that is, the formal, stylistic, and aesthetic features of text, where text is a domain of symbols separable from a domain of practice. This disregards the social life of text which cannot be abstracted out from the materialities giving shape to it (Bakhtin 1981).

“Folklorization” is 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. “Folklorization” is also important in another sense here: 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. As Saba Mahmood (2005, 48-53) notes in a different context, pious Muslim women’s critique of the secularization of Egyptian society decries what she calls “the folklorization of worship” by which rites of worship are thought to be nothing more than customs or conventions that put on Islamic form or style but do not necessarily serve as “a means to the training and realization of a pious self.” The “folklorization” of Mappila devotional performance genres such as the mawluḍ and mala, in this sense, views these genres as symbols of a Mappila identity, but loses sight of the fact that transformative practices such as recitation of
the *maw'ld* and singing of the *mala* not only display but also generate the identity of the performer. My use of “religious puritanism” in describing the attitude of some Mappila literary scholars like Moulavi and Kareem above is intended to mark the fact that an appreciation of the performative dimensions of Mappila literary culture is a forgone failure if carried out within an understanding of Islam that not only depreciates but a priori dismisses such performances as a threat to “pure” Islam which are best got rid of, rather than appreciated.

“Syncretism” is a familiar, readily available analytic of multidisciplinary use to characterize and examine cultural and religious exchange, interaction, and mixture. Though it has a life of both desirable and derogatory connotations, scholars of South Asia have often employed syncretism positively to capture “reconciliation between religious traditions and communities otherwise taken to be at odds” (Mir 2006). Imtiaz Ahmad (1981), an Indian sociologist who has published several edited volumes on Indian Muslims, has been at the forefront of mobilizing the analytic resources of syncretism in order to present an Indian Islam which exhibits a strong influence of local beliefs and customs.²⁵ He proclaims the superiority of his “more comprehensive and more concrete” sociological and social anthropological vision that foregrounds actual Muslim behaviors and practices against an Islamicist or theological approach to Indian Islam that lays too much emphasis on texts, and as a result projects a reified idea of Islam (Ahmad 1981, 2). Key to Ahmad’s line of argument is that Islamic practices in India are “heavily underlined by elements which are accretions from the local environment and contradict the fundamentalist view of the beliefs and practices to which Muslims must adhere,” and

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²⁵ Imtiaz Ahmad’s four edited volumes featuring a variety of essays by different authors that cover a wide range of topics on Indian Islam, viz. *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims* (1973), *Family, Kinship and Marriage among Muslims in India* (1976), *Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India* (1981) and *Modernization and Social Change among Muslims in India* (1983), are relevant.
accordingly syncretism is hailed as an adequate critical tool with which to analyze the phenomenon of “lived Islam” (1981, 7). Ahmad puts forth a peaceful co-existence of a high Islamic tradition and custom-centered traditions as “complementary and integral parts of a single common religious system” (1981, 15).

Ahmad’s position, however, has been fiercely contested by scholars of South Asian Islam. The British historian of South Asian Islam Francis Robinson’s critique (1983) is a case in point. Questioning Ahmad’s vision of Indian Islam, Robinson locates Ahmad among such scholars of Indo-Muslim history who emphasize that “Indian Muslims have their deep roots in Indian society” and they are “natural inhabitants of an Indian world” (1983, 187). Robinson suggests, in spite of himself, that the views of Ahmad and scholars of his ilk which overestimate the “Indianness” of Islam in India are more politically motivated than are academically inspired. Robinson’s main argument with Ahmad, however, is that far from being unique, Indian Islam seems to have much in common with Islamic societies elsewhere, including in terms of the same customs and beliefs that are showcased by Ahmad and others as examples of Hindu influences in Indian Islam such as shrine visitation; that Islam has an identity of its own that is not reducible to Hindu religious systems and traditions; and that the so-called syncretic or non-Islamic practices found among Indian Muslims are often a matter of “imperfect knowledge or temporary expedient,” as such practices will ultimately give way to “Islamization,” the realization of the “pattern of perfection, a standard which all should strive to reach” (1983, 190-91).

What is remarkable about Robinson’s critique of Ahmad is that he invites us to think about the elision we often encounter in syncretic accounts of Islam of the sheer diversity of opinions
and modalities concerning disputed practices within the tradition such as shrine visitation. As Robinson notes, despite shrine attendance being a feature of every Muslim society in the world, this is regarded by Ahmad and his fellow-travelers as an “essentially Hindu institution absorbed within Indian Islam” (1983, 188). These scholars erroneously bundle together all controversial practices such as shrine visitation and celebration of Urus (the death anniversaries of saints), into a deceptive category of “saint worship” without taking into account a range of relevant Islamic understandings expressed by the ulama and Sufis. As Robinson notes:

…there is considerable literature devoted to conduct at saints’ tombs, particular forms of behaviour indicating the proper difference in attitude towards the saints and towards God…Even a cursory acquaintance with the fatawa and malfuzat literature indicates that very few Muslims see anything wrong in such activity (i.e. shrine attendance). What is crucial is the intention with which it is pursued and the manner in which it is done (Robinson: 1983, 189).

Similarly, challenging the tendency in scholarship on Indian Islam to depict “saint worship” as syncretistic and tolerant, Peter van der Veer (1994) has argued that Muslims who engage in this contentious practice dismiss syncretism and that tolerance is not a necessary, immediate corollary to it. He points out that while some Muslims identify “saint worship” as a later “corrupting” accretion to “true” Islam, others fiercely contest this charge by viewing such

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26 Robinson’s position has equally drawn flak for, inter alia, its tendency to “fetishize” the category “Islamic.” See Das 1984, Minault 1984 and Metcalf 1995, 2009; also see Robinson’s replies to both Das and Minault in Robinson 1986. However, some kind of essentialized notion of Islam, made, unmade and remade within the Islamic tradition over time, seems central to any attempt to grasp Islam or Muslims, or any religious tradition for that matter, whether one emphasizes doctrine or practice. On the idea of Islam as “discursive tradition,” see Asad 1986; also relevant is Hirschkind 1997; for a critical evaluation of this concept, see chapter three in Mahmood 2005.
practice as constitutive of “orthodox” Islam. By describing “saint worship” as syncretistic, van der Veer concludes, “anthropological outsiders…affirm one position in a Muslim debate about orthodoxy” (1994, 210).

In Kerala too, the Muslims who participate in shrine visitation and Urus, known as nerchas in popular parlance, more often than not describe what they do as “saint veneration,” not as “saint worship.” They maintain a clear distinction between worship which is only due to God and veneration which is the privilege of revered personalities and objects, including Sufis, often called awliya (friends of God). They consider saint veneration as a virtuous, beneficent act that ultimately pleases God and earns them his rewards. The advocates of “syncretic” Islam fail to take note of this important distinction and therefore paint a slapdash picture of the matter in hand with the brush of “saint worship.”

Susan Bayly (1986, 36-37) also looks at the culture of South Indian Muslims from a “syncretic” standpoint and stresses that Islam as practiced by Tamil Muslims has been “shaped and moulded by an equally complex religious system” that includes not only “‘folk’ worship and the ‘orthodox’ textual religion of Tamil Hindus, but also the highly syncretic beliefs of local Christians.”

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27 In their anthology Syncretism in Religion: A Reader, Anita Leopold and Jeppe Jensen (2004) offers a broad selection of essays that maps the checkered trajectory of “syncretism” as a problematic in religious studies that is employed to describe and analyze a wide range of practices characterized by the mixing or overlap of traditions.

28 For an overview of traditional Sunni theology, including devotional practices such as shrine visitation and saint veneration, based on the Shafi’i school of jurisprudence followed by the majority of Mappilas, see the madrasa textbooks in Arabi Malayalam and Arabic covering mainly Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic theology, recitative rules of the Quran, Islamic ethics, and history of Islam published by All Kerala Islamic Educational Board [established in 1951 as the first and foremost feeder wing of the influential All Kerala Ulama Federation which was itself founded in 1926 with Varakkal Sayyid Abdurahiman ba-Alavi Mullakkoya Thangal (d. 1932) at its helm] for use in its thousands of madrasas across Kerala and beyond to impart basic Islamic instruction. Malayalam textbooks tailor-made for use in English-medium schools are also available. [http://samastha.info/](http://samastha.info/).
The moot point, however, is as to how helpful syncretism is as an analytic to describe and theorize cultural and religious give and take, commingling and mutual incorporation. Scholars have invited our attention to the dangers of enforcing a sweeping rubric such as syncretism on any attempt to understand religious practices that pull together people from different religious traditions. For instance, while acknowledging many parallels that obtain between Sufi devotionalism and Hindu *bhakti* thought, Richard Eaton (1978), nonetheless, cautions us about the temptation to generalize the relations between Sufis and adherents of the *bhakti* tradition in particular, and between Sufis and Hindus in general. Eaton mainly offers two reasons to bolster his cautionary note. First, in the case of the Sufis of Bijapur who are the subject-matter of Eaton’s famous historical study, their key tenets always “remained within the framework of Islamic mystical tradition,” and these Sufis seem to have selectively borrowed Hindu influences such as aspects of Hindu cosmology and nomenclature “only” when those influences “could serve as supporting buttresses for this framework” (Eaton 1978, 152). He goes on to note that “There is certainly nothing syncretic about one religious system borrowing the vocabulary of another religious system if the latter is used only to support the former” (Eaton 1978, 152). As I have briefly noted above, the author of the popular Mappila devotional performance ballad *Muhyiddin Mala* unequivocally anchors his narrative in the larger Islamic devotional literature, and there is nothing syncretic about some epic conventions of the mala that parallel those of the Hindu *bhakti* tradition such as initial invocations, closing prayers, and sections celebrating the text’s beneficent effects—conventions that form part of the examples which pro-syncretic scholars of Islam in Kerala like Kunhi (1982) often highlight to cement their case for a Hindu-influenced Islamic culture of Kerala. Second, Eaton observes that as literary interaction and social interaction are two very disparate and separate matters, borrowing names, models or
illustrations from non-Muslim devotional or philosophical traditions provide little or no insight into the general pattern of Sufi interaction with non-Muslims. Showcasing the experiences of the Sufis he studied, Eaton has stressed that though Sufis occasionally could readily accept or incorporate abstract aspects of Hindu philosophy and religion, they have indeed dealt with specific Hindu groups quite differently, even at times in a hostile fashion, on other occasions. Incidentally, Qadi Muhammad, who was the chief Muslim religious leader and jurist of his time in Calicut, as his honorific title “Qadi” (literally, “judge”) denotes, has freely incorporated local literary devices into his devotional narrative, while, however, his central aim in composing the work has remained the consolidation of his fellow Muslims’ adherence and attachment to the fold of Islam by copiously extolling the virtues of a Sufi figure who has been instrumental in spreading Islam on a massive scale (Mandalamkunnu 2008).

Notably, Farina Mir (2006) reconsiders the analytical powers of syncretism in the South Asian context in her study of the Punjabi qissa tradition which draws on different cultural and religious formations. She argues that reconciliation between conflicting religious communities has been internal to the conceptual architecture of syncretism and this formulation rests on an assumption, with little historical foundation, that relationships between religious traditions are always conflictual. Also, syncretism which presupposes the purity and coherence of the traditions that come together, elides the sheer diversity of opinion, thought and belief that is characteristic of any of the major religious traditions in South Asia and tends to privilege preexisting religious identities as of utmost importance. Mir rejects the usefulness of syncretism as an analytic in both literary and religious realms: in the sphere of literature, syncretism gives us nothing more than “a most generic idea of mixture” without attending to “the specific implications of mixture,” whereas in the field of religious studies, it becomes more problematic.
as it suggests an “a priori conflictual relationship between religious traditions, implies that these traditions are coherent, if not pure, and privileges preexisting religious identities as paramount” (Mir 2006, 733-734).

More recently, in his analysis of the methods by which Tamil-speaking Muslims in India and Southeast Asia defend contentious practices in everyday life, Torsten Tschacher (2009) critiques the discussions of Muslim religiosity that proceed along the assumed binaries of “normative”/“accommodative” and “formal”/“informal.” The latter parts of these binaries that are imputed to “popular” Islamic religiosity are more often than not associated with “syncretism”. Tschacher challenges this propensity to “syncretize” “popular” Islam by pointing up that the Muslims he worked with mount a defense of controversial practices such as mawlid and saint veneration by way of references to Islamic scripture and scholarly tradition and are as profoundly concerned with authenticity as are their detractors. As a result, these Muslims often generate “stridently anti-syncretic rhetoric” (Tschacher 2009, 1).

Cultural syncretism has been a major structuring principle of research on the Mappila Muslims of Kerala. For example, Stephen Dale and M. Gangadhara Menon (1978) discuss nerchas (annual festivals commemorating the death anniversaries of saints or martyrs among Mappilas), what they call “saint-martyr worship,” from a standpoint heavily coloured by syncretism. Some kind of syncretism is also hovering around Miller’s (1976) survey of Mappilas as an Islamic community. As has already been touched on, the influence of this analytical category virtually permeates almost every page of Kunhi’s (1982) exploration into various aspects of Mappila Muslim culture. Similarly, A. P. Ibrahim Kunju (1989) in his study of Mappila Muslims of Kerala also does not hesitate to deploy syncretism to grasp the Muslim “adaptations from Hinduism”: “The development of saint veneration was probably the earliest
syncretic activity, created by the example of popular Hinduism and the reminiscence of converts from Hinduism” (Kunju 1989, 6). We are not clear as to what is syncretic about a practice that the practitioners themselves conceive and explain in primarily Islamic terms. Kunju’s remarks once again reveal that saint veneration, often glossed as “saint worship” in most scholarly accounts of “lived Islam,” has become something of an archetype of “syncretic Islam” in contemporary scholarship. In his turn, V. C. Harris (1995, 201) invokes “folk Islam,” a term no less misleading than “syncretism” while commenting on the arts and festivals of the Muslims of Kerala, a community whose “cultural identity,” we are told, “offers a peculiar mix of the indigenous and the exotic.” Harris pits a “revealed religion,” “the established tenet of theology,” against a “lived religion” that is “the celebratory rituals of ordinary people coming to grips with their conditions of living,” and associates the latter with “folk Islam” (202). He does not, however, pause over his problematic to reflect on whether Muslims themselves choose to view their “lived” Islam along lines drawn by him. Very recently, Salah Punathil (2013) has fallen back upon “syncretism” as a frame of reference for understanding Keralite Islam prior to the twentieth century.

All the four afore-mentioned approaches to Mappila literary studies have been analytically reductive and their consequences for a fuller appreciation of Mappila literary culture have been disastrous. It is the devotional performance narratives of Mappilas that have borne the brunt of the epistemic violence unleashed by these interpretive grids currently afloat in Mappila literary studies.29 In this dissertation I want to recuperate those aspects of Mappila literature that

29 The episteme, the conditions of possibilities of knowledge, is, as Michel Foucault (1980, 197) puts it, “the ‘apparatus’ which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterized as scientific.” Epistemic violence, a complete overhaul of the episteme, calls attention to the structural damage wrought by preexisting
have performative value and have been glaringly overlooked or distorted in prevalent research and scholarship by viewing the performative as an ineluctable part of Mappila literary culture in all its richness and multiplexity. This in turn allows us to appreciate better the rich tapestry of sociality that forms Mappila lifescape that is visibly invisible in the existing accounts of the Mappila community. To do this, we need to have a theoretical apparatus that does not parochialize the idea of the literary at the expense of the performative and the social.

**Towards a Useful Analytic: Framing the Social Life of the Literary**

The “literary” is not inscribed on a clean slate, with no traces of other modes of social life. Rather, it is deeply imbricated with the way people conduct their affairs in life. Jacques Derrida (1992, 40) has already alerted us to the modern invention of “literature” as an analytical category. Modernity affixes the signature of literature to a special set of laws or conventions that disarticulate “high” literature from lesser works that do not map onto the novel code of “literariness.” One may recall here the fact that the English word “literature” acquired the narrower sense of imaginative, elegant and artistic writing not prior to the eighteenth century (Wellek 1973; Pollock 2003). M. M. Bakhtin (1981, 33) has also pointed up the fluidity of the supposed boundaries marking off genres and works of literature and nonliterature by stating that such boundaries are not made in heaven. My point in reviewing this definitional discourse on the grammar of the concept of literature is not to deny the existence of any essential notion of interpretive grids that accompany any act within which that act is rendered legible; see Spivak 1988.
literature in premodernity. In fact, as Sheldon Pollock (2000, 594-95) shows, Sanskrit literary tradition, among others, evoked in no uncertain terms both “theoretical and practical system of differences” that distinguished the “literary” from all other sorts of texts. I simply want to call attention to the fact that a particular, reductive conception of literature emblematic of modernity has come to serve as the principal optic through which to study literary cultures, including the Mappila tradition, which then inhibits the resultant scholarship from a more nuanced, holistic investigation.

Closely tied to this modern notion of the literary is the telos that animates it: a material artifact intended for silent, individual consumption which contributes to the disaggregation of a private sphere. On this view, reading is an individual, private activity bereft of any bearing on the social domain (Yandell 2014). This dominant paradigm of reading defines “proper reading” as the “essentially, private, individual consumption of narrative with the effect of and for the purpose of ‘pleasure’” (Boyarin 1993, 18). The model of privatized reading, and the construction of the “individual bourgeois reader” who found the right form in the novel were the products of a recent, particular historical moment, necessitated by “some combination of printing press, the Protestant Reformation and the development of capitalism” (Yandell 2014, 28). This mainstream paradigm of reading and the reading subject does not exhaust the field of reading as practiced by humans worldwide, however. Different people have brought different conceptions of reading to bear up on their reading practices. Thus, as Daniel Boyarin (1993, 11) has shown, the ancient Jewish culture conceives of reading as an “oral, social and collective” act. Similarly, he argues that the Hebrew culture of the biblical and Talmudic periods did not simply have a word that referred to the modern idea of reading as pleasure-seeking and pleasure-deriving privatized activity (Boyarin 1993, 18). Also, Nicholas Howe (1993) provides valuable insight into the
shifting grammar of reading. As he notes, In Anglo-Saxon society, which regarded reading as a fundamentally social practice, the Old English words “‘raed” and “raedan” and their cognate words in other Indo-European languages first denoted the act of giving counsel through speech’ (1993, 63). On the “medieval textual community,” Howe remarks that they are “a group bound together by the reading aloud of texts to listeners for the purpose of interpretation” (1993, 62). Even in early modern Europe, reading was inescapably a social activity for the masses (Darnton: [1991] 2001, 166, as cited in Yandell 2014, 28).

In a fascinating comparative portrayal of the constructions of readers by two prominent British poets John Milton (d. 1674) and William Wordsworth (d. 1850), John Yandell (2014) puts to relief how the relationship between text and reader has changed drastically in the space of little over a century. While Milton in his *Paradise Lost* (1674) emphatically rejects the conception of the writer’s isolation captured in the image of the writer as lonely seer, he insists on a direct link between the act of writing and the audience for whom he writes, without entertaining any absolute separation of oral and written language, nor suggesting a model of reading as private, solitary or individual. Thus, as Yandell argues, for Milton, reading takes on meaning in “the social, in interactions that are necessarily located in specific times and places” (Yandell 2014, 34). In contrast, the “Reader” that Wordsworth constructs in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), is configured as “singular: sound judgments are made by individual readers, reading alone,” who shall “‘abide independently by his own feelings’” (Yandell 2014, 35). The Wordsworthian model of reading, as Yandell reminds us, meshes comfortably with the afore-said dominant paradigm of reading, which privileges independence as a defining feature of the reader, for whom reading is teleologically geared to pleasure. It is no surprise that the dominant European assumptions about reading that have been challenged by other divergent
conceptions of reading, as we have seen above, are sorely inadequate to an understanding of “embodied readings” (Yandell 2014, 108) and performative forums of literary cultures in general.

Bakhtin (1981, 259) has also criticized a parochial notion of stylistics as “private craftsmanship”, what might be called a “histological” approach to text, because such an idea ignores the social life of discourse outside the artist’s study. He also decries the tendency in stylistics to isolate certain thematic or narrowly stylistic features or aspects of a work and present them as if they were the whole of that work. As Bakhtin quickly adds, such isolated aspects far from exhaust or define the totality of the work. His “sociological poetics” that urges an understanding of verbal discourse as a social phenomenon enables us to move beyond a narrowly-thought out stylistics that chiefly examines literary works on the level of composition and thematics to consider the “socially charged life” of words. Paul Connerton (1989), in his insightful account of memory as a cultural and social faculty conveyed and sustained by more or less ritual performances, draws our attention to the fact that hermeneutics has excessively focused on the written, or what has been inscribed. In principle, hermeneutics well applies to any object or any practice capable of bearing a meaning such as legal and theological texts, works of art, rituals, bodily expressions, etc. Yet, as Connerton points out, though bodily practices are in theory fit for hermeneutic inquiry, in practice hermeneutics has always taken “inscription” or text as its privileged object (1989, 4).

The relegation of literature to a putative private sphere, the seat of silent, individual consumption, and an overrated focus on inscription to the exclusion of other possible bearers and producers of meaning such as bodily practices blind us to those features of the literary that have performative value beyond the private. Again, I do not want to posit a binary of private/public in
that the performative texts I am analyzing in this dissertation have existence only in public, that they are not used for private recitation, if not for contemplation. Instead, I want to gesture to the important fact that the economy of the performance tradition I am concerned with presently does not operate along a factitious binary of private/public: in it the two poles of the antinomy are dissolved and both become co-constitutive. And performance, whether carried out individually as in private recitation or publically as in group performances, is woven into the very existential architecture of Mappila literary culture, the blatant underacknowledgement of this fact by contemporary scholarship notwithstanding.

Also central to the analytic I am trying to develop here is the notion of text or genre as practice rather than as idea and its relation to context (Hanks 1987, 1989; Freeman 2003). This notion helps us to conceptualize text or genre not as merely expressive of an always already surround or locus, but as equally constitutive of contexts and cultural formations. While underscoring the social production text, Hanks (1989, 96) mentions a number of concepts that inform, produce and sustain text: “co-text,” the accompanying discourse in a text; “meta-text,” discourse referring to, or describing, or framing the interpretation of text; “con-text,” the broader environment a text responds to and operates on; “pre-text,” anything that prepares the ground for or justifies the production or interpretation of text; “sub-text,” the understandings or themes that form the background or tacit dimensions of a text; and “after-text,” the intended-anticipated or otherwise consequences and outcomes of producing, distributing, or receiving a text. Thus, there is perhaps no single text, but texts of text in any chosen text. While it is possible to privilege some of these notional coordinates of text over others in any given analysis, a better understanding of a text requires us to put it in perspective by taking on board all this constellation of concepts undergirding text. This is a crucial point that assists in seeing not only
how Mappila devotional performance genres such as the *mawlid* and *mala* helped forge what I have called a Mappila literary formation (see chapters three and four) but also how and why these genres are still consequential for Mappila self-fashioning in contemporary Kerala (see chapters five and six).