CHAPTER SIX

"Blessed Are the Ones who Sing this Garland": The *Mala* and Contemporary Mappila Devotion

Although devotional occasions surrounding the *mala* can be numerous, two occasions were particularly noticed with greater frequency during my fieldwork in South Malabar. The first is the nocturnal recitation of the *mala* in Mappila households for the genre's general meritorious value. *Muhyiddin Mala*, the prototype of the Arabi Malayalam *mala* genre, is the text commonly recited on this occasion. Second, the recitation of the *mala* by Mappila women during their pregnancy seeking easy childbirth. The *mala* usually used for this occasion is *Nafeesath Mala.* While I had free access to the former, I was not allowed to observe the latter due to religious reasons and therefore had to rely on second hand accounts in order to capture the dynamics of the Mappila women's devotional life.[105] I, however, had become familiar with the pride of place that the *mala* assumes in Mappila women's life by seeing and hearing my own family—that includes my mother and sister, and a host of *mahram*[106] relatives—sing the mala with varied intentions, including the two indicated above. These two occasions bring into sharp relief, as I

[105] I am grateful to Soudabi Muneer for providing me with ethnographic observations on Mappila women's recitation of the *mala, Nafeesath Mala* in particular, in times of pregnancy and childbirth for being able to deliver the child without danger. I still suspect that a female ethnographer would find it immensely rewarding to explore at length Mappila women's devotional life in which the *mala* sustains a significant presence.

[106] In Islamic law the Arabic word "*mahram*" means any unmarriageable kin with whom sexual intercourse would be considered incestuous. The *mahram* relationship is secured by blood, marriage or suckling. Cf. The Quran, 4: 22-23.

hope to show below, the continuing relevance of Arabi Malayalam devotional performance genres to the making up of Mappila self-fashioning in contemporary Kerala.

Muhyiddin Mala as Devotional Practice: Some Vignettes from the Present

I step into the house of my friend, Hashim, at Kondotty near the Calicut International Airport after collectively saying our sunset prayers at a local mosque in the summer of 2012. I can hear a soft, tuneful voice from inside the house. This is Hashim's father Kunharamu, a trader, singing the incipit of *Muhyiddin Mala*, sitting on a chair in the living room of his house with a *sabeena* in his hands. Upon seeing me, he pauses and gets up to receive me. We both shake our hands, exchanging customary greetings. He then asks me to be seated and, after making sure that his son will keep me company for the time being, he returns to his *sabeena* and picks up where he has just left off. As I and Hashim are sitting at a table enjoying refreshments, Kunharamu becomes engrossed in his song without giving any hint of being disturbed either by my presence or the babble of voices in the living room and the adjoining kitchen. After I listen to Kunharamu's recitation of the *mala* for a while, I find myself singing along to it.

After finishing the *mala,* Kunhramu joins us at the table and offers me apologies for having to complete his recitation before entering into a conversation with me. He told me that reading the *mala* was a matter of routine for him—he usually first reads the Quran and then sings the *mala* after the sunset prayers almost on a daily basis. I turned to Hashim and asked: What place does the *mala* assume in your life? His answer was not atypical:

> You see, singing the *mala* is not an unfamiliar activity to me, as you can rightly imagine, since I have grown up in a household like this where my parents regularly recite the *mala*, the *mawlud* and other devotional narratives. Muneerkka (dear Muneer), you have just heard my father singing. My mom also recites it after her prayers at night. For me, I can't recite it daily but occasionally, in spite of myself. I think, being a graduate student, I have a "busy" schedule.

Hashim was suggesting that much as he would love to sing the *mala* on a regular basis like his parents did, he was unable to do so because he was not as "free" as his parents were. This obviously invited an objection from his father who said that it was not a matter of who is busy and who is not:

> It is all about your interest in the thing. Nobody is sitting idle here. I still do my work and run my household. At the same time, I also take the time to fulfil my religious obligations. Just because we have to attend to numerous things these days does not mean we are too busy to do things we ought to do.

Kunharamu paused waiting for me to nod in agreement. While both father and son agree that people are very busy in contemporary times, they differ significantly on how "being busy" should affect one's religious/devotional practice. For the son, the fact that he is busy is an excuse for his failure to regularly participate in devotional practice such as the singing of the *mala.* In contrast, what the father wants to emphasize is the importance of devotional practice in a busy life, that one needs to set one's priorities right and find time to accomplish them despite a

maddening schedule. This seemingly silly verbal exchange between a father and a son about what it means to be "busy" in the modern world, however, brings into light the apparent tensions attending contemporary Mappila devotional life.[107]

Once he finished his point, gleefully watching his son looking convinced by his argument, Kunharamu began to explain to me why he and Mappilas like him consider it important to sing the *mala*, thereby taking the topic of conversation to the ethical work that devotional genres such as the *mala* perform on the Mappila self. As he kept on talking, his son was knitting his brows in concentration. Not surprisingly, the reasons that figured predominantly in Kunharamu's statement were not different from the reasons that the Mappilas I worked with provided for performance of, and participation in, the *mawlud* (see chapter five). These included seeking *barkat*, merit-making, cultivation of the virtuous love, paying respect to the signs of God, and the larger goal of accomplishment of piety in life:

> The (*Muhyiddin*) *Mala* is all about Shaikh Muhyiddin, who, as the *mala* itself says, is the *sultan-ul-awliya* (the king of the friends of God, the Sufi masters). He embodies *barkat* so reciting his mala, i.e. *Muhyiddin Mala*, brings *barkat*, too. This apart, it is part of our faith to love and revere the *awliya* (sufi figures) as they have attained greater closeness to God. Thus, the very act of singing a song in honour of such great souls is meritorious (*kuli kittunna karyamanu*).

[107] Faizy's (2008) comment on the decline in ritual performance of Mappila devotional genres such as the *mala* in contemporary Kerala, which I have quoted in chapter four, may be recalled here. The main reason that he cites, i.e. people's changing life habits, worldly preoccupations and distractions, etc., finds an echo in Hashim's response, although his father Kunharamu would like to consider the whole issue as a question of "interest," not of "busy schedule."

When I asked him how he cultivated love and respect for a Sufi master like Shaikh Muhyiddin, Kunharamu said, noting that he was about to come to this point:

> My friend, love, respect, all these things are not always already there in people's lives. Through the regular act of singing the *mala* one also develops and enhances, and not merely shows, the love and respect for the shaikh. Moreover, the repeated recitation of the *mala* also helps us acquire pious dispositions that encourage us to live in accord with the commands of God. When we don't keep singing the *mala* or reciting the Quran, for example, we suffer from moral deprivation (*dharmika sunyata*) and feel less inclined to do virtuous deeds (*nallathu cheyyanulla manassundakilla*)."

Interestingly, Hashim was in total agreement with his father on the rationale behind the practice of the *mala* recitation and he merely reproduced what his father had been saying until then when I turned to him to get his view on the matter.

Note that in drawing our attention to the transformative force of the *mala,* Kunharamu points up the "devotional effectiveness" of the *mala* genre.[108] While pointing out the generative powers of the embodied practice of *mala* recitation, Kunharamu unsettles the traditional difference between means and end—a point that is also crucial to our analysis of the Mappila *mawlud* above. Within this framework, the *mala* is construed both as a means and as an end, rather than just a means to some higher end. That is, it is an end in that the *mala*, according to Mappilas like Kunharamu, is a conduit of *barkat* and the *mala* recitation is a meritorious act in

[108] My use of the term "devotional effectiveness" follows Targoff 2001, 51.

and of itself. It is a means because engaging in this devotional practice makes the practitioner piously disposed so that s/he remains oriented to proper Islamic conduct.

Singing Praise to the Great Lady: *Nafeesath Mala* and Mappila Women

The logic that seems to be at work in Mappila women's popular recitation of *Nafeesath Mala* during pregnancy is not different from that of popular recitations of *Muhyiddin Mala* discussed above. The motives for the act of singing here involve both seeking fulfilment of a specific desire—an easy childbirth—and invocation of the meritorious value of the Sufi figure who is extolled in the *mala*. *Nafeesath Mala,* written by no less a Mappila poet than Nalakathu Kunhi Moideen (d. 1919),[109] extols the virtues of Sayyida Nafeesa or the Lady Nafeesa (d. 824), great-great granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, who lived in Cairo, Egypt and was well renowned for her piety and mystical powers. The *mala* comprises 124 couplets and follows standard generic conventions such as beginning in the name of God, divine invocations, and invoking blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad and his companions before moving on to praise the Lady Nafeesa. What sets *Nafeesath Mala* apart is its heavy use of Arabic words and phrases with little or no effort at vernacularizing them. For example, after the opening couplet, "With *bismi*, *hamd*, *swalat*, and *salam* in place[110]/I do hereby begin the garland on the Lady Nafeesa"

[109] Born at Ponnani in Malappuram district of Kerala, Nalakathu Kunhi Moideen is a noted Mappila poet who has to his credit a number of Arabi Malayalam poems, including *Nafeesath Mala.* He has also translated fictional prose from Persian into Arabi Malayalam (Moulavi and Kareem, 1978, 444-45).

[110] *Bismi* refers to the Islamic practice of beginning an activity in God's name; *hamd* is praise of God; *swalat* means invoking blessings upon Prophet Muhammad; and *salam* is the prayer that peace be upon the Prophet (and his family).

(*NM*, 1-2), there are full five couplets in honour of the Prophet that are Arabic through and through. The process of Arabicizing Malayalam not only through use of the Arabic script but also through free deployment of Arabic words and Arab-Muslim literary traditions transforms the vernacular into a different variety of language while leaving Arabic also strongly influenced by Malayalam.[111]

After the Arabic lines, the poet once again invokes the Prophet and his four caliphs, Abu Bakar, ʻUmar, ʻUthman, and ʻAli, also known as the leaders of the faithful, seeking their blessings for his *mala.* These invocatory couplets numbering twelve, then, set in motion a copious eulogy to the Lady Nafeesa whose noble pedigree that goes back to the Prophet himself, extraordinary piety and asceticism, and miraculous deeds and, more particularly, curative powers are all celebrated throughout the poem. A recurrent motif in the *mala* is people accepting Islam by literally uttering *shahada*[112] in front of the Lady Nafeesa after they got rid of afflictions or disasters due to her blessings and/or prayers. For example,

Hearken! A Jewish girl with her body

Paralyzed from head to toe, so tired,

[111] In her fascinating study of the Arabic cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia, Ronit Ricci engages the "Arabicized" languages and literary cultures of the Tamil-speaking region of Southeast India and the Indonesian-Malay archipelago between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. By "Arabicized" Ricci emphasizes "the wide range of instances in which Arabic influenced local languages, most often combining with them rather than by replacing them" (Ricci 2011, 15). Most important, instead of thinking only about how the vernacular has been influenced by the cosmopolitan, she urges us to think about the ways in which the cosmopolitan itself has been vernacularized in the process of transforming the vernacular.

[112] Literally meaning "testimony", the Islamic creed of *shahada* marks one's formal entry and initiation into the fold of Islam. Also known as the first pillar of Islam, the *shahada* contains the performative act of bearing witness to the oneness of God ("there is no God [worthy of being worshipped] but Allah") and to the Prophet Muhammad being the messenger of God.

The great Lady splashed her with ritual water

Lo, the girl walked back into life then and there.

Thus relieved and with smile back on her face

The girl and her family with their tongues

Uttered *shahada* and believed in the *din* (Islam)

Believing as they did in their hearts of hearts.

(*NM*, 57-64)

A related, and also predominant, motif of the *mala* is panic-stricken women in their labour throes offering vows to the Lady Nafeesa and, as a result, delivering their babies with little or no complications. An example is,

…A woman writhing in her labour pains,

Left so for two days, highly worried and frightened.

She then made a vow to this Lady, and

Delivered her child well before completing her vow!

(*NM*, 225-228)

Towards the end of the *mala,* the author reveals his name and asks God to forgive him his sins and bestow upon him the Lady Nafeesa's protection:

The sins of mine, that is Nalakathu Kunhi Moideen

Forgive them all and leave me in Her protection, O Allah!

The *mala* ends by invoking blessings and prayers on the Prophet Muhammad, his family and his companions. In keeping with the *mala* conventions, the main body of *Nafeesath Mala* is followed by *iravu* (prayer song in Arabi Malayalam) and a prayer in Arabic prose, often called *dua'*. Unlike many *malas,* including the *Muhyiddin, Nafeesath Mala* has two *iravus,* which are clearly marked as "First *Iravu*" and "Second *Iravu*" respectively in the *sabeena,* although this demarcation is missing from some of the versions of the *mala* found in little prayer books in circulation in Malabar today.[113]

Although *Nafeesath Mala,* like all devotional songs, is recited and sung for its general meritorious value by contemporary Mappilas—male and female, what is most intriguing is its special association with pregnant and parturient women. I have already pointed out that child birth, the anxieties and fears of expectant mothers, the healing touch of the Lady Nafeesa in times of difficulty, etc. figure as prominent motifs of *Nafeesath Mala*. These "soft" themes have struck a responsive chord with Mappila women who recite this *mala* during pregnancy, seeking the Lady Nafeesa's protection against evil and harm, and, most especially, for being granted easy child birth.

[113] For example, in a cheaply available little prayer book containing *Muhyiddin Mala, Rifaii Mala,* and *Nafeesath Mala,* the first *iravu* of *Nafeesath Mala* is titled "*Iravu*" and the second "*Munajath*-Tune: *Fukaynar*." "*Munajath*" means "conversation" and "*fukaynar*" indicates the tune according to which the song is to be sung. This prayer book is undated and has on its cover the imprint "Capital International Books, Calicut-4. Ph: 0495 3042818."

In the pages that follow I want to shed some ethnographic light on the status and role of *Nafeesath Mala* as a special devotion for pregnant and parturient Mappila women. In so doing, my interest is not in merely describing a particular use of the *mala* for Mappilas. I am rather keen on analytically getting at the ways in which the *mala* helps constitute the ethical self of Mappila women—to see how reciting the *mala* produces in many a Mappila woman affects of piety that are consequential for the making of these women's religious and ethical selfhoods. My argument here is with those who, in their moments of certitude, either dismiss the *mala* and its performative value as deviant or superstitious, or point up the genre's literary merit at the expense of its status as devotional practice.[114] This is not to be taken as a theological statement either: it is a simple call to avoid certain epistemic violence by urging an understanding of practices of the *mala* tradition on their own terms without imposing upon them any analytical limits—theological or otherwise.

As I noted earlier, my ethnographic observations on Mappila women's devotional life involving the *mala* genre are only partly first-hand. As a male ethnographer, I was not able to observe myself the Mappila women's recitation of the *mala* due to religious restrictions on male-female interaction. Therefore, my access to the devotional life of Mappila women is based on field-notes and observations supplied by a female research assistant, a Mappila herself, who has not only interviewed Mappila women reciting the *mala* but indeed recited the *mala* herself on various occasions. In addition to this, my own family has provided me with moments of consistent exposure to, and participation in, devotional practices in which the *mawlud* and *mala*

[114] I have already mentioned that the *mala* lives a controversial life within the Islamic tradition and that there is a tendency among Mappila scholars to stop short of considering the *mala* as devotional practice. For details, see my discussion in chapter one.

figure predominantly. Given this personal entanglement, my analysis of contemporary Mappila devotional lifescape borders on the auto-ethnographic, too.

While *Nafeesath Mala* has appealed to men as well as women in the Mappila community and is by no means considered a "women's *mala*," its wider appeal to women and its connection with pregnant and parturient women are indeed remarkable. The outstanding motive for reciting the *mala* in this context is easy childbirth or delivery of the child without danger, even as the general meritorious value of the devotional song is of no less consequence. As Bushra, mother of three children who is in her early thirties and who described herself as a "housewife,"[115] tells us:

> Although I have grown up listening to *Nafeesath Mala* in my own household, I found myself reciting it quite frequently at the instigation of my mother-in-law when I was carrying my first child. She used to tell me that for an easy childbirth, it was especially important to keep reciting or uttering some good verses (*nallathu enthenkilum chollipparanju kondirikkuka*) during pregnancy, most importantly *Nafeesath Mala*, as these were all things that had been handed down to us from generation to generation.

Note that Bushra is drawing attention to the well-honoured tradition of the *mala* recitation, *Nafeesath Mala* in particular, in both her and her husband's families. Also, the numinous association of *Nafeesath Mala* with pregnancy and childbirth is underscored. Although the special motive for Bushra's recitation of the *mala* is the comfort of an easy childbirth, the act is also saturated with meritorious value that goes beyond the immediate motive—springing as it

[115] Bushra says that she holds an undergraduate degree in English Literature and is currently studying for MA in English through distance mode at Calicut University, Kerala.

does from the *mala's* generic belonging to devotional performance poetry. Bushra's further remarks illustrate this point as well as illuminate the means-end imbrication characteristic of the *mala* as devotional practice:

> Mala is a thing of *baraka* (*barkatulla sadhanam*). When we recite it, we also partake of that *baraka*— even if we have no particular intention (*niyyat*) in mind unlike when we recite it during pregnancy (for easy and normal delivery). Whether or not our intentions are fulfilled, the very act of *mala* recitation fills us with funds of blessing and merit. Again, this act influences our ways and helps us remain piously inclined (*padachone pediyullavarayirikkan*, "to remain in fear of God"). So has the *usthad* (teacher) of our mosque taught us.

Bushra's account has some notable parallels with the one offered by Kunharamu above where he waxes eloquent on the devotional effectiveness of the *mala*, *Muhyiddin Mala* in particular. While stressing the connection of *Nafeesath Mala* with pregnant and parturient women, Bushra is also careful to point out the general numinous and meritorious value of *Nafessath Mala* by placing it in the larger pantheon of devotional performance songlines best understood, in the accounts of both Bushra and Kunharamu, to be transformative practice. A special relationship between the reciter and the object of devotion is forged, which eventually transforms the persona of the reciter by producing in her affects and dispositions of piety. Thus, while the general meritorious value of the *mala* is an end in itself, it also serves as a means to a larger end of keeping oneself geared towards the standards of piety—of maintaining those dispositions that help one lead one's daily life in step with the demands of Islamic piety.

To understand the reciter-figure (or reverer-revered) relationship enacted in devotional practices such as the *mala* and *mawlud,* it is useful to pause over the lifeworld of these Mappilas within which such an enactment is rendered legible. In this Mappila lifeworld, the subject is not so much a self-owning, liberal individual as one who is dispossessed in transcendence, losing oneself to an exemplary figure, to a higher authority. Again, as Bushra put it,

> The Lady Nafeesa is a great woman, who set an example to us all with her profound piety and unwavering devotion. She was a beloved of God. It's part of our faith not only to love and revere those who enjoy high status with God (*Allahuvinte adukkal valiyavar*), but also to follow their example as much as we can.

Notably, the relationship of intense love and reverence with an exemplary figure such as the Prophet and his immediate family, and Sufi leaders that Bushra points to has been the staple theme and motif of Islamic devotional literature.[116] In fact, this relationship of intimacy between the subject and the object of veneration is generously thematized in the *mawlud* and *mala* discussed in this dissertation. In traditions of Islamic devotionalism, the emphasis is not so much on simply following the commandments of the moral exemplar, the Prophet, for example, but on trying to live his ways and behaviour in letter and spirit. As Saba Mahmood notes in her incisive analysis of the sense of shock, hurt and personal loss expressed by many devout Muslims in the wake of the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, a devout Muslim's relationship to the Prophet is best comprehended as "assimilative" rather than "communicative" or "representational" (Mahmood 2009, 76).

[116] See, for example, Schimmel 1985; Asani 1995; Katz 2007; and Stetkevych 2010.

> Muhammad, in this understanding, is not simply a proper noun referring to a particular historical figure, but the mark of a relation of similitude. In this economy of signification, he is a figure of immanence in his constant exemplariness, and is therefore not a referential sign that stands apart from an essence that it denotes (Mahmood 2009, 76).[117]

Mahmood's observations above cannot be more apposite. An understanding of the lifeworld animating the relationship of intimacy between the devout subject and the object of veneration helps us appreciate better the *mawlud* and *mala* as devotional transformative practices. For Mappilas like Bushra and Kunharamu, the embodied practices and virtues tied to these devotional performance genres serve as a substrate through which one comes to develop and cultivate pious and ethical capacities that influence and fashion one's conduct in life, thereby influencing and fashioning one's own self.

The *Publicness* of Personal Devotion: Some Thoughts

[117] To illuminate the attachment of intimacy between a devout Muslim and the exemplary figure of the Prophet Muhammad, Mahmood exploits an understanding of icon not simply as "an image but as a cluster of meanings that might suggest a persona, an authoritative presence, or even a shared imagination" (Mahmood 2009, 74). This view of icon stresses the capacity inherent in an icon for allowing an individual or a group to find themselves in a "structure that influences how one conducts oneself in this world" (Mahmood 2009, 74). Also, she draws on the Aristotelian notion of *schesis* to further illustrate her point. *Schesis,* which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* is "the manner in which a thing is related to something else" (quoted in Mahmood 2009, 76), connotes a sense of "embodied habitation and intimate proximity that imbues such a relation" (Mahmood 2009, 76). Thus, the inhabitation of the exemplary model is understood to be an act of love which binds one to the exemplar through a deep sense of intimacy and desire.

When compared with the *mawlud* which is usually a group event, the *mala* is largely recited individually rather than collectively in contemporary Malabar. This contrast should be clear from the ethnographic vignettes presented above. *Mawlud* can also be, and indeed is, performed individually, although its rendering often marks a collective, public occasion. Yet, the most personal and individual of recitations is ineluctably collective and public in an important sense. As devotional practice, the *mawlud* and *mala* are both discourse and act, text and performance, and communication and rite, which help the practitioners express, produce, and sustain a relationship with God, the Prophet, or the revered figure. Even when recited individually, the *mawlud* and *mala,* at once speech and bodily practice as they are, remain strongly shaped by the sociality of the Mappila lifescape—the worldviews, stories, events, things, and institutions of the Mappila Muslim community in Kerala. When individuals recite the *mawlud* and *mala,* they are making use of a text and language that are not simply their own; they are indeed exploiting a tradition that, to use Michel de Certeau's words, "carrie(s) within itself the presence of others"—coreligionists, friends, ancestors, religious authorities and exemplars.[118]

The publicness of devotional performance genres such as the *mawlud* and *mala* can further be illustrated by considering them as dialogic: they contain speech addressed to God, the Prophet, or the Sufi figure. We need only recall that prayers saturate the textures of both the *mawlud* and *mala.* Also, if we follow Bakhtin's insight, they both carry within them diverse kinds of "speech genres": dialogues, stories, anecdotes, songs and eulogies, invocations, prayers, confessions, laments, greetings, arguments and challenges, the cut and thrust of ordinary speech, and so on. These are all "relatively stable types" of concrete, heterogeneous "utterances" in which language is realized across diverse areas of human activity (Bakhtin 1986, 60). The beauty

[118] As quoted in Reinburg 2012, 140.

of this Bakhtinian insight is that it urges us to understand devotional performance genres like the *mawlud* and *mala* as part of the practice of everyday life while allowing no neat binary opposition between "high" and "low," "elite" and "popular," categories of utterances or live speech.[119]

Above all, if we take Bakhtin seriously, once again, the *mawlud* and *mala* are dialogic, for speech, nay language itself, is inherently dialogic. As Bakhtin puts it, "Our speech, that is all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others' words…These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (Bakhtin 1986, 89). The "dialogicity" and "polyphony" inherent to language makes speech and communication inescapably concrete and dialogic, grounded as it is in specific historical moment and social setting. Therefore, any attempt to grasp devotional genres in particular, and the practices of literary culture in general, should be made by paying due attention to both historical and ethnographic details as has been, it is hoped, the case with the attempt made to analyze the *mawlud* and *mala* in this dissertation.

A related point that needs reiteration is that the devotional practices of the *mawlud* and *mala* are embodied practices: reading, recitation, listening and audition, and performance engage the senses and the body. Thus, a *mala* recital or a *mawlud* performance brings into full play both language and movements of the body, which co-produce, rather than express, worldviews and lifeworlds. However, this constitutive role of bodily practices, including recitation and audition,

[119] Taking her inspiration from Bakhtin's sociological poetics and from a rich tradition of recent anthropological work, Virginia Reinburg offers an excellent analysis of prayer as speech and rite in her study of the French books of hours in fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. See Reinburg 2012.

in forging selfhood and subjectivity is by now a familiar yet insightful theme in recent anthropological scholarship on ritual and embodiment.[120]

Sustaining a Tradition: Islamic Homiletics and Mappila Devotionalism

The devotional effectiveness of the *mala,* like the *mawlud,* is rhetorically secured and sustained through Islamic homiletic practices, especially the mosque sermons and lessons that are frequently encountered in many Mappila *mahallus* even today. I have already mentioned these homiletic practices above where I analyze the Mappila *mawlud* in ethnographic detail. In many of the mosque sermons, and Islamic orations and lectures that I attended in South Malabar, the *mala* and *mawlud* (*malayum mawludum*) were often used together as prototypes of Mappila devotional life. Many of these orations and sermons were attended by both men and women, although there were also regular Islamic sermons and lessons meant especially for Mappila women, often held in madrasas of a *mahallu.* Even when a sermon was delivered in the mosque, which only men were allowed to enter for religious reasons, special arrangements were made for women to listen to the sermon from an adjacent building, most commonly a madrasa.[121] A

[120] See, for example, Bell 1992, and Asad 1993, Mahmood 2005, and Hirschkind 2006.
[121] The entry of women into the mosque is a contentious theological issue in Keralite Islam as elsewhere in the Muslim world. The Mappilas who believe in the devotional practices of the *mawlud* and *mala,* popularly known as Sunnis in a restricted sense of the term, do not encourage female entry into the mosque and assert that the best place of worship for a woman remains her home. This position is contested by other Islamic groups like Mujahids and the Jama'te Islami, often labeled "reformist," who encourage the attendance of women at mosque and often make a point of using this to define themselves against the "traditionally-inclined" Sunnis.

recurrent theme of these sermons and lessons has been an impassioned exhortation to the recitation of the *mala* and *mawlud* (*malayum mawludum othuka*).

Here is an example to illustrate this point. I am quoting from a sermon delivered by Usthad Koya Darimi to an audience that included men and women. The setting of this sermon is the courtyard of a madrasa overlooking a mosque on the outskirts of a small town in South Malabar. Men and children have seated themselves on benches dotting about the courtyard while women have settled down inside the madrasa hall. Speaking in a Malayalam peppered with Arabic phrases, from a rostrum on a stage put up at the front of the courtyard, Darimi is now warming to his theme:

> Brothers and sisters! It is incumbent upon us to remember and venerate those whom Allah loves and holds in high regard. The messenger of God (*rasulullahi*), the companions of the Prophet (*swahabat*), and *awliya* (Sufi exemplars, literally "the friends of God)—all are the objects of Allah's love and grace. This love and respect for the beloved of God is part of our *iman* (faith), part of our tradition (*parambaryam*). It is this tradition of ours that gave us the *mala* and *mawlud.* Our great forebears composed *mawluds* and *malas* and exhorted us to recite them throughout our life. Not only that we earn merits (*kuli kittuka*) when we recite these sacred texts but also these texts help us stay bound to the straight path (*swirathul mustaqim*). When we are in the habit of reciting the *mala* and *mawlud,* we feel obliged to do things that Allah and His Prophet, and *awliya* like and approve of, and we feel less drawn to things that invite the wrath of Allah, things that our *Nabi* (the Prophet) and his exemplary followers hate and disapprove of. Thus, we should understand that the *mala* and *mawlud* are no mean practices. In fact, they are things which we require to complete our faith (*iman*). Therefore, recite these texts

> individually and collectively, wherever and whenever you can. Put together *mawlud* gatherings and similar righteous occasions, join them in droves, and grow stronger and stronger in faith. The time and space, energy and wealth expended on these meritorious deeds will all be highly rewarded!

It is worth our while to pull out certain points from Darimi's eloquent speech, providing as it does a window onto the Islamic homiletic practices that are crucial to sustaining devotional performance genres for many contemporary Mappilas. First, Darimi grounds the practices of the *mawlud* and *mala* in Mappila *parambaryam*—the Mappila tradition handed down to posterity by generations of Mappilas. By invoking tradition, Darimi is able to make a forceful case for the devotional effectiveness of the *mawlud* and *mala.* In fact, he avers that the *mawlud* and *mala* are part, and hence constitutive, of the so-called Mappila tradition as he and Mappilas like him understand it. Second, even as he stresses the meritorious value of devotional genres, he is also careful to point out the ethical work such genres do for Mappila selves by helping them become piously disposed in everyday life.

The question that engages my interest here, incidentally, is not how far devotional performance genres such as the *mawlud* and *mala* succeed in producing pious dispositions in Mappilas who practice them, or, in a judgmental vein, how practitioners deviate into unethical or impious behaviour despite their participation in the devotional practices of the *mawlud* and *mala.* Important as these questions are, they help us little to understand the practices in question because the same questions could also be asked of any ritual or rite of worship performed by any group of people. My interest is in trying to understand how practitioners of devotional genres such as the *mawlud* and *mala* view their practices and to learn from them what these practices

mean and do to them. The success or failure involved in this devotional practice, or the degree of devotional effectiveness actually acquired through devotional act is not my concern in this dissertation. Finally, to return to Darimi's sermon above, the Islamic homiletic and pedagogic practices impart to ordinary Mappilas religious literacy necessary to sustain devotional genres. As we have already seen, all of my informants including Kunharamu and Bushra were able to explain to me the what, why and how of the practices of the *mawlud* and *mala.* They knew the meritorious value of devotional poetry and its importance to realizing the kind of Muslims they wanted to be. Religious sermons and orations by traditional Islamic scholars have been crucial to keeping these Mappilas informed about the details and consequences of practices that fashion their very selves. Bushra's words in a passage I quoted above, "So has the *ustad* of our mosque taught us," are testimony to this fact.

So far, I have tried to elucidate ethnographically the devotional practices of the *mawlud* and *mala* that are very much alive in contemporary Kerala. The prevalence of these practices should also square with the fact that such practices are also waning in many parts of the state today, and this is especially true of the *mala* genre in that *mawlud* performances are still held quite frequently in many Mappila *mahallus* and neighbourhoods. This, I think, has to do with the fact that the *mawlud* has the advantage of being a collective devotional activity that, in addition to its connection with the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, marks several important occasions in Mappila life such as rites of passage, housewarmings, and so forth. In contrast, the *mala* is infrequently performed as a public event, its main use now being individual recitation for its meritorious value and/or its numinous, curative powers.

At any rate, that there is a perceptible lack of interest and investment on part of many Mappilas in the *mawlud* and *mala* as devotional practice these days is a point that even

practitioners agree with. There is a growing recognition to this effect among Mappila religious leaders who often lament this lack of interest of the present generation in the *mawlud* and *mala* and condemn it as one of the causes of moral decadence in the community. Even in the exhortatory sermons aimed at encouraging contemporary Mappilas to keep up the tradition of devotional performance genres, this lamentation is a necessary motif. Darimi's speech, again, is a case in point:

> Now a days, many of us are not interested in *mawluds* and *malas*. How can we expect ourselves to be morally correct and God-fearing if we neglect these practices. We are after worldly concerns and material comforts so we don't have any thought spared for things such as *mawluds* and *malas*. Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have to mend our ways and hold fast to our tradition by keeping up the recitation of the *mala* and *mawlud*, and by doing similar good deeds.

These laments bring into focus the diminishing influence of devotional performance genres in contemporary Mappila life as much as they reveal a self-conscious attempt on part of Mappilas to hold fast to their traditions of devotion and piety. Thus, even as one keeps telling the "decline" narrative about the *mawlud* and *mala*, it is also important to be sensitive to the practitioners' abiding concern to revitalize these practices.

Tradition **vs** ***Reform*** **in Keralite Islam: A Category Mistake?**

In the end, using insights from my ethnographic account of the practices of Mappila devotional literary tradition in contemporary Kerala, I want to put into question some recent scholarly stereotyping of "traditionalist" Mappila Muslims, called Sunnis, as "backward," "superstitious," and "un-modern" people belonging to rural and low-status locations. I have in mind here the work of two British anthropologists, Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, who, in an article entitled "Islamism and Social Reform in Kerala, South India," seek to celebrate a putative Islamic reformism at the cost of "traditionalist Islam" without, as we shall see, adequately thinking through the categories of "tradition" and "reform" (Osella and Osella 2008). Osellas' article is driven by an urge to critique ethnographic tendencies that, according to them, "idealize and celebrate *sufi* 'traditionalism' as authentically South Asian," and smack of "frank distaste for reformism" (Osella and Osella 2008, 317). In an attempt to rectify these ethnographic tendencies, Osellas take up for analysis the Mujahids, the activists and supporters of Kerala Nadwathul Mujahideen (KNM), a "reformist" Islamic group in Kerala, and present them as "modern," educated, and urban middle-class against the "traditionalist" Sunnis who are described as the opposites of the epithets depicting the Mujahids: "backward," "superstitious," "unmodern," "rural," etc. (Osella and Osella 2008, 317). Although the duo state that Sufism and reformism do not constitute a neat binary, they end up pitting them against each other as if they were two mutually exclusive categories. This way of understanding Kerala Muslims is egregiously reductive. The Kerala Sunni Muslims, labelled "backward," "superstitious," "unmodern," and "rural" in Osellas' account, are indeed the "traditionalist," Sufi-inspired Mappilas who engage in devotional practices such as the *mala* and *mawlud*—the very Mappilas whose devotional performance literature has been the staple of this dissertation. On the other hand, the "modern" and "reformist" Mujahids define themselves in terms of their fierce opposition to such practices.

While there are strong ideological disagreements regarding correct Islamic practice between the Mappila Sunnis and the Mujahids, I do not think the terms "traditionalist" and "reformist," when mobilized as two polar opposites, are helpful in describing these two groups, respectively. Indeed, such a view provides a shoddy picture of a situation that is more complicated than the "tradition"-versus-"reform" rhetoric allows.

It is a commonplace of contemporary scholarship that "tradition" is not to be understood as a monolith that invariably resists and opposes change but as a dynamic entity that even makes change possible.[122] In the words of historian of religion William Graham, "traditionalism" as a defining feature of Islam, does not lie in "some imagined atavism, regressivism, fatalism, or rejection of change and challenge," but in the conviction that "a personally guaranteed connection with a model past, and especially with model persons, offers the only sound basis…for forming and reforming one's society in any age."[123] On this line of thinking, the dichotomous constructions surrounding "tradition," "modernity,' and "reform" are difficult to sustain. Thus, when Osellas contrast "traditionalist," "backward" Sunni Mappilas with their "modern," "reformist" Mujahid counterparts, we witness the epistemic violence of the binary constructions in question.[124] The "traditionalist" Sunnis in Kerala are no less reform-oriented and modern any more than their "reformist" counterparts are. It may be the case that the nature and

[122] See MacIntyre 1984, 1988; Asad 1986; and Zaman 2002.
[123] As quoted in Zaman 2002, 3.

[124] This is despite Osellas' remarks in the article that "…not only are categories such as 'reformed' and 'traditionalist' Islam unstable and produced discursively" (Osella and Osella 2008, 320). This shows that although the duo are aware of the unstableness of categories such as "traditionalist" and "reformist," they end up reproducing such categories in their attempt to understand Keralite Islam. In their hurry to give Islamic reformism in Kerala its due, which, according to them, it was denied in contemporary scholarship on South Asian Islam that displays a bias towards Sufism, Osellas also betray a bias, not in favour of Sufi-inspired traditionalist Muslims but the reformist Muslim groups such as the Mujahids, however.

standards of reform adopted by both groups vary substantively but that does not entitle one to reform and "modernity" to the exclusion of the other. That the Mappila Sunnis have responded to the challenges of the changing times in ways of their own can be pressed home by one example: the reform of madrasas, traditional Islamic institutions. Even as trying to preserve the traditional Islamic character of their institutions, numerous centers of Islamic higher learning run by the Mappila Sunni groups across Kerala have reformed their curricula by incorporating modern disciplines such as the English language, and natural and social sciences.[125] Moreover, the Sunni Mappilas also exploit the full possibilities of advanced modern technology, print and electronic media, and the Internet in sustaining and keeping alive their worldviews and lifeworlds. Therefore, it makes little or no sense to insinuate, as Osellas do, that the Sunni Mappilas are "backward" and "traditionalist," rather than "modern" and "reformist." In other words, my argument with Osellas is that dichotomous categories such as "traditionalist" and "reformist," "backward" and "modern" are not adequate for understanding divergent streams of Islam in Kerala as these categories tell us very little about the specificity of Kerala's different Islamic groups.

Similarly, Osellas surrender to another set of dyads when they remark:

> Kerala reformism follows [one] of the commonly recognized patterns: an urban, educated middle class waving the stick of reformism at rural, lower class Muslims who stand accused of straying from the path of 'true Islam' (Osella and Osella 2008, 323).

[125] For more on this point, especially on the standing of English on the madrasa curricula in Kerala, See Kuzhiyan 2013.

This point is also singled out for attention in the abstract of Osellas' article:

> Kerala Muslims (like Kerala Hindus and Christians) associate religious reformism with: a self-consciously modern outlook; the promotion of education; rallying support from the middle classes. There is a concomitant contemporary association of orthoprax traditionalism with 'backward', superstitious and un-modern practices, troped as being located in rural and low-status locations (Osella and Osella 2008, 317).

The association of traditionalism with uneducated, rural, low-status Mappilas following an association of reformism with educated, urban, middle-class Mappilas is misguided, however tempting this might seem. The ethnographic vignettes in this dissertation demonstrate that many Mappilas like Bushra, Hashim and Akbar who engage in devotional practices of the *mawlud* and *mala* and hence belong to the fold of the so-called "traditionalist" Muslims are young, educated and well-to-do people living in towns of the Muslim-majority district of Malappuram in Kerala. In fact, some of my informants are Mappilas who are active in academia as teachers, researchers and administrators. The city of Kozhikode, which Osellas present as the citadel of Kerala's Islamic reformism, is not only home to the headquarters of traditionalist Muslim organizations but also abuzz with contentious Islamic practices like the *mawlud* and *mala.* Given this complicated and nuanced picture, one will do well to move away from any attempt to pigeonhole Keralite Islam along the binaries of traditionalist/reformist, rural/urban, illiterate/educated, unmodern/modern, and so on.

Conclusion

In the last analysis, by focusing in the preceding chapter and the present one on the constitutive role of the *mawlud* and *mala* narratives in the crafting of a Mappila ethical self, I have sought to provide a refreshingly productive approach to the study of devotional performance genres that are part and parcel of Mappila literary culture. This approach is characterized by a profound sensitivity to the social production of Mappila devotional narratives that have tremendous bearing on the making of a Sunni Mappila in Keralite Islam. In doing so, I have explicitly written and argued *against* the dominant paradigm of analyzing Mappila literary culture through a "histological" lens that objectifies literary texts as stylistic wonders with little or no bearing on how men and women conduct their affairs in life. This dissertation, however, has no aim to impugn the aesthetic qualities of Mappila literary culture. In fact, my work is an attempt to grasp the mutual imbrication and entanglement of the aesthetic and the performative in Mappila literary culture—a culture that *makes* Mappilas who they are while also *being made* by them.