CHAPTER THREE

“The Ruby That Is Alif”: Arabi Malayalam and the Mappila Literary Formation

Against the backdrop outlined thus far, in this chapter I want to foreground the central and constitutive role of Arabi Malayalam along with its devotional performance poetic tradition in the making up of what I call a Mappila literary formation. While the general contours of a Mappila literary formation tied to Arabi Malayalam and its literary traditions are outlined in this chapter, I try to flesh out this point further in the chapter that follows by considering at length the textual practices of an early seventeenth century Mappila devotional performance ballad, \textit{Muhyiddin Mala}, and by analyzing saint veneration as a predominant form of piety in Mappila literary culture. Therefore, these two chapters are inextricably linked to each other and may be taken as a one organic whole rather than two separate chapters.

The Idea of a Mappila Literary Formation

\footnote{The term is inspired by the opening phrase of a popular Mappila devotional song “\textit{Alifenna manikyam}”. Alif is the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, whereas the Malayalam word manikyam means “ruby.” I appropriate this term to symbolize the coming together of Arabic and Malayalam in the linguistic hybrid called Arabi Malayalam. This song called \textit{iravu}, literally “prayer”, is appended to the text of \textit{Muhyiddin Mala} in some manuscripts and its authorship is ascribed to Qadi Muhyiddin who is no less a figure than the son of Qadi Muhammad, author of \textit{Muhyiddin Mala} (Moulavi and Kareem 1978). I found this \textit{iravu} in the so-called Agathi manuscript of \textit{Muhyiddin Mala}, copied, as the manuscript itself states, by one Keelafuyya Purayil Abdul Hafeez who is the son of Agathiyl Kuttichodayil Quadiri Haji, dated 1286 AH, 1046 Malayalam Era. A copy of this manuscript is available at the Arabi Malayalam Research and Reference Library of Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar Memorial Mappila Kala Akademi at Kondotty in Malappuram district of Kerala.}
My idea of a “Mappila literary formation” is deeply indebted to the concept of “literary formation” that Farina Mir (2010) brings to bear upon her incisive analysis of the Punjabi qissa tradition during the British colonial period. According to Mir, a Punjabi literary formation is “a group constituted through its members’ shared practices of producing, circulating, performing, reading, and listening to Punjabi literary texts” (Mir 2010, 97). Mir builds her critical concept on three important notions that throw into focus crucial facets of her analytic: “sociotextual community, “cultural formation,” and “publics and counterpublics.”

Each of these notions cries for explanation. First, the idea of a sociotextual community as formulated by Sheldon Pollock (2003, 27) in his introduction to his edited volume on South Asian literary cultures refers to “the community for which literature is produced, in which it circulates, and which derives a portion of its self-understanding as a community from the very act of hearing, reading, performing, reproducing, and circulating literary texts.” The vital point that Mir stresses as she draws on Pollock’s conception of a sociotextual community is “mutual coproduction” by which she means that “individuals and communities produce texts, and texts, in turn, help produce both individual and community identity” (2010, 97-98). This mutual production of individuals and communities on one hand, and texts on the other is also germane to the Mappila literary formation I explore below. Next, Mary Poovey’s (1995, 1) notion of a “cultural formation” calls attention to “formation as an active concept—the process of forming”—not as “culture or formation as nouns of stasis or realization.” Poovey lays emphasis on the active sense of formation because, as she puts it, “culture is never fully formed, never achieved as a unified, homogeneous whole” (1995, 1, original emphasis). For Mir, the take-away point from Poovey is the process of “formation” as active and dynamic rather than passive and
static, which in turn enables her to point up that the Punjabi literary formation is constituted through action. Finally, in his elaborate discussion of the formation of “publics and counterpublics” in the modern period, Michael Warner (2002a, 75) notes that a public “appears to be open to indefinite strangers, but in fact selects participants by criteria of shared social space (though not necessarily territorial space), habitus, topical concerns, intergeneric references, and circulating intelligible forms.” To Warner, the importance of individual action in forming a social collective is paramount, and as publics and counterpublics “select participants,” they are not simply always already there but are constituted through processes of inclusion and exclusion. Counterpublics are also publics. They are “counter” to the extent that “they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger-sociability and its reflexivity; as publics, they remain oriented to stranger-circulation in a way that is not just strategic, but also constitutive of membership and its affects” (Warner 2002a, 87-88). 48 Mir, accordingly, brings Warner’s insights into publics and counterpublics to illuminate how the Punjabi literary formation forged a social collective based not only on a shared language but also on shared literary practices and ideas. She, however, qualifies the usefulness of Warner’s notion of publics and counterpublics for reflecting on the historical significance of people’s participation in Punjabi literary culture. This is mainly because both entertain different notions of politics. Whereas publics and counterpublics, to Warner, practically derive their agency in relation to the state, the Punjabi literary formation, in what Mir describes as its “most unique feature,” maintained a relative independence from the state, and its politics was not directed at the state in any recognizable form (Mir 2010, 99).

48 Also see Warner 2002b.
In exploiting Mir’s notion of “literary formation” to think about the social production of Mappila literary culture, I want to underscore the performative dimensions of this culture based on shared devotional practices, and notions and expressions of piety through which a Mappila literary formation has been forged. Thus, the Mappila literary formation is a constellation of people who are made up through their shared acts of composing, disseminating, singing, reciting, reading, and listening to Mappila literary works, devotional performance genres such as the *mala* in particular. In other words, this literary formation is also a constellation of *texts*—not just of *people*—that have fashioned and have been fashioned by the practices of Mappila literary culture.

“*The Sailing Ships of Yore*:\(^{49}\) Arabi Malayalam and Mappila Literary Culture

The literary accomplishments of the Mappila Muslims of Kerala have found a fitting vehicle for expression in Arabi Malayalam, also called Mappila Malayalam. Variously written as “Arabic-Malayalam,” “Arabic Malayalam,” “Arabi-Malayalam,” and “Arabi Malayalam,”\(^{50}\) this unique hybrid dialect puts to use a Malayalam grammatical corpus, Arabic script, and a lexis drawn not

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\(^{49}\) This term comes from a popular Mappila song beginning “*Pandu pandu payakkappalu.*” The song commemorates the arrival of Islam in Kerala during the Prophet Muhammad’s lifetime through a missionary caravan led by Malik ibn Dinar, a companion of the Prophet (*swahabi*), who reached Kerala aboard a sailing ship—hence the “sailing ships of yore.”

\(^{50}\) I abandon a hyphenated “Arabic-Malayalam” and an unhyphenated “Arabic Malayalam” for “Arabi Malayalam” so as to gesture towards the popular usage of the term, where a localized “Arabi” is preferred to an Anglicized “Arabic.” I avoid a hyphenated “Arabi-Malayalam” to mark the fact that Arabi Malayalam has entered common parlance in Kerala such that it no longer needs a hyphen to denote what it is. Though K. O Shamsuddin (1978) prefers the appellation “Mappila Malayalam” to “Arabi Malayalam,” the latter has gained popular traction and figures prominently in scholarship on the subject.
only from Arabic and Malayalam, whose union is signified by the name “Arabi Malayalam,” but also from several other tongues such as Tamil, Urdu, and Persian. This could be best understood as a language that the Muslims of Kerala have formed primarily to convey the importance of their religion, though Arabi Malayalam has also been exploited for purposes of non-Islamic import.

The origins of Arabi Malayalam, like the very beginning of Islam in Kerala, are still a bone of contention. While the strong trade links between Arabia and Malabar dating way back to the period before the seventh century have been acknowledged by early travelers and historians, no historical consensus on the advent of Islam into Kerala has yet been reached. While the tradition of the Malayali king Cheraman Perumal’s conversion to Islam, widely circulating among Malayalis and immensely popular among Mappilas, has asserted the arrival of Islam in Kerala right during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, historians, including the late sixteenth century Malayali Muslim scholar Shaikh Zainuddin al-Makhdoom (d. 1581) of Ponnani whose famous Tuhfatul Mujahideen (the Gift to Warriors) remains a key reference point for the history of Kerala, have called into doubt the veracity of this assertion without, however, rejecting the tradition altogether. Qissat Shakarwati Faramad (The Story of the King Perumal), an anonymous Arabic manuscript, apparently written in Malabar many centuries before Tuhfatul Mujahideen, depicts Cheraman Perumal as having been honoured and converted by the Prophet himself even before the historic migration of the Prophet and his companions from Mecca into Medina in 622 and as having passed away as a Muslim on his way to spread Islam in Kerala. F. Friedmann (1975) has published an English translation of and commentary on this manuscript along with the original text. I do not summarize the details of this tradition and the conflicting arguments about the origins of Islam in Kerala here, as these are available elsewhere (Logan
1887; Muhammad 1961; Miller 1976; Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Kunhi 1982; More 2011). Suffice to say, many Mappila writers have held the view that it is safe to conclude that Islam arrived in Kerala during the seventh century itself and that there are historical facts buried in the background of the popular Cheraman Perumal tradition though it is difficult to say which is which (Muhammad 1961; Abu 1970; Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Kunhi 1982).

Likewise, the origins of Arabi Malayalam are shrouded in obscurity. However, it has been suggested that this language hybrid must have been in gestation, and subsequently born, with the beginning of Arab contact with what we today call Kerala that dates back to several centuries before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad in sixth century Mecca (Abu 1970; Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Kunhi 1982). The Arabian way of crafting novel communicative forms included employing the Arabic script to write the vernaculars they encountered abroad. This gave rise to a variety of language mixtures or blends such as Arabi Sindhi, Arabi Punjabi and Arabi Tamil. Arabi Malayalam is no exception (Abu 1970; C. K. Kareem 1983; Kunhi 1985). As for Persian, the Arabic tongue that came with the spread of Islam in the Persian Empire in the seventh century not only supplanted the then prevailing Persian script but virtually rendered it highly Arabized lexically with numerous Arabic loan words (Pedersen 1984). Though it may be the case that Arabs might have started creating a hybridized dialect, however embryonic, that we now call Arabi Malayalam in collaboration with the local inhabitants of Kerala ever since they opened their trade contacts with this part of the world, with the advent of Islam into Kerala the need for a medium of expression in the form of Arabi Malayalam that would fulfil the pedagogic requirements of the new faith must have been felt with a stronger sense of immediacy and urgency. The available indigenous and foreign historical accounts of Malayali Muslims show beyond doubt that Muslims had established themselves as a community
with a strong sense of Islamic identity in Malabar by the fourteenth century and that by the time the earliest extant work in Arabi Malayalam saw the light in the early seventeenth century, this form of language had already been in wide circulation as a fully-fledged medium of literary expression—a fact attested to by the relatively highly-developed language found in *Muhyiddin Mala* of 1607, the earliest extant Arabi Malayalam work (Abu 1970; Dale 1980; C. K. Kareem 1983). Nevertheless, the story of the origins and development of Arabi Malayalam is also the story of Arabs’ ancient trade relations with Malabar and of the appearance of Islam on the south-west coast of India. (And the origins of both these historical events still remain largely unsettled).

In addition to the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet, the modern Arabi Malayalam script employs additional orthographic markers to represent Malayalam sounds that are absent in Arabic. It is assumed that in the beginning only Arabic letters were exclusively used to mark all Malayalam phonemes but with the passage of time the script was revised and enlarged by adding necessary symbols, thereby enabling Arabi Malayalam to signify the entire body of Malayalam phonology with discrete graphic markers (Shamsuddin 1978). Much as a comprehensive linguistic analysis of Arabi Malayalam is still a long overdue, highly rewarding exercise, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to venture into that province.

Arabi Malayalam’s birth and development as a unique language mixture has been inextricably bound up with the Islamic identity and character of Mappilas. The major impetus to its development seems to be the need felt within the nascent Muslim community of Kerala for a system of communication that is best suited to giving its members basic instruction in the tenets of Islam (Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Shamsuddin 1978; Kunhi 1982, 1985). While almost all Muslims are taught to read the Quran in Arabic for liturgical reasons and are therefore able to
read and often write Arabic, the knowledge of fundamental Islamic principles and rites of worship required of Muslims to conduct their daily affairs has to be imparted in a vernacular language that the Muslims share with the larger Malayali society as their mother tongue. While Arabic, highly revered by Muslims as the language of the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad and Paradise, serves to foreground the Islamic identity of Mappilas, Malayalam comes to represent their local Malayali roots and character. Thus, Arabi Malayalam accordingly combines both these indispensable aspects of Mappila identity. The crafting of a vernacularized language like Arabi Malayalam provided Mappilas with the right means to preserve their distinct religious and cultural character without having to forfeit their primary linguistic identity. It may be recalled that Malayalam, like other non-Arabic languages, is not capable of conveying the full significance of the Arabic words and expressions so vital to the Islamic tradition. Thus, the necessity of a parallel system of communication that is able to render such deeply religiously invested Arabic vocabulary as original as possible and at the same time exploit the rich resources of Malayalam and other languages such as Tamil, Urdu, Persian, and Sanskrit can hardly be overrated. It may also be borne in mind that the majority of Muslims who could speak Malayalam but were unable to read or write it found the Arabic script—with which they were familiar due to their ability to recite the Quran—an easier and more convenient tool to attain

51 This is not to suggest that the vast majority of Muslims—who are without access to Arabic—are structurally/linguistically unable to grasp core elements of Islam originally disseminated through Arabic. I am rather pointing to the historical need for Arabicized vernaculars in Muslim societies living in non-Arab countries, say, for example, the countries of South and Southeast Asia, where Islam encountered cultures vastly distant and different from those of the Middle East.
literacy in their spoken language as well as to facilitate and further their religious education (Shamsuddin 1978; Moulavi and Kareem 1978).  

Mappila scholars are divided over the linguistic status of Arabi Malayalam. On one end of the spectrum are placed writers like O. Abu (1970) and C. K. Kareem (1983, 1985) who have argued for the unique status of Arabi Malayalam as a language in its own right rather than a mere dialect of Malayalam. Abu mobilizes those phonological, orthographic, lexical, grammatical, and stylistic features of Arabi Malayalam that he thinks militate against standard Malayalam in order to lend credence to his argument. He writes: “Arabi Malayalam is not a language mixture that blends words from Arabic and Malayalam. If Arabi Malayalam is stripped of its Arabic loan words, the remainder does not qualify as Malayalam through and through” (Abu 1970, 124). C. K. Kareem, for his part, is quite convinced that Arabi Malayalam exhibits its own possibilities and potentialities as an alternative “language” existing alongside Malayalam and goes to the extent of describing Arabi Malayalam as a “complete tongue” (1983, 160-170; 1985, 22-33). While the position adopted by Abu and C. K. Kareem is obviously over the top, their remarks are nonetheless a commentary on the tendency among many Mappilas to assert the self-worth of Arabi Malayalam against standard Malayalam, and to flaunt it as a distinct cultural feat of the community. This assumes significance especially because Arabi Malayalam has often been seen as both the cause and symptom of Mappila “backwardness” and “obscurantism” in colonial and popular discourses (Innes 1907; Kunhi 1982).

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52 Tyka Shuayb Alim (1993) provides a similar account of the origins and growth of Arabi Tamil, also known as Arwi, in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu; see especially Chapter 5, pp. 84-126. Torsten Tschacher (2001) discusses a miscellany of Arabi Tamil literary works and its relevance for the study of Tamil Muslims.
On the other end of the spectrum are perched writers like P. K. Muhammad Kunhi (1982, 1985) who are not willing to consider Arabi Malayalam as more than an orthographic system for representing Malayalam. Questioning Arabi Malayalam’s claim to the status of a “distinct” or “complete” language as has been advocated by Abu and C. K. Kareem, Kunhi reduces Arabi Malayalam to nothing more than the system of writing Malayalam in the Arabic script. In a rhetorical question, Kunhi asks: “Is not writing Malayalam in the Arabic script the aim of Arabi Malayalam?” (Kunhi 1985, 57). Thus, since Arabi Malayalam is essentially nothing but Malayalam dressed in the Arabic alphabet, it is important for Kunhi and others like him to cleanse Arabi Malayalam of all its “crude, ugly, hermetic” expressions and revise its script so as to suit the needs of modern Malayalam (Kunhi 1985, 62). Flanked by these two extremes is the view that seeks to steer a middle course by holding that Arabi Malayalam presents itself as a language mixture that is not reducible to Malayalam as such. K. O. Shamsuddin (1978) in his concise metalinguistic treatise on Arabi Malayalam, or what he calls Mappila Malayalam, the first and only such study ever undertaken, describes the object of his analysis as a “language mixture,” as is abundantly clear from the title of his book. He mainly argues that Arabi Malayalam is not a phenomenon that is unlike Manipravalam which is an admixture of Malayalam, or the speech of Kerala, and Sanskrit. Likewise, while discussing the differences of opinion on the status of Arabi Malayalam, Balakrishnan Vallikkunnu (1999) also favours the stance that Arabi Malayalam is best understood as a language mixture. According to him, Arabi Malayalam does not adhere to any system of general rules that govern, for instance, the borrowing and distribution of words, and this relative freedom from established sets of rules is emblematic of any language mixture. He continues: “Arabi Malayalam is the medium of literary expression for the Mappilas of Kerala. In this sense, it is right to assume that this is a
language mixture which developed out of Kerala’s contact with Arabic” (Vallikkunnu 1999, 42). This middle course is free from the overstatement and reductionism of the two above-mentioned extremes, respectively, while taking cognizance of the fact that Arabi Malayalam has its own genius and therefore needs to be analyzed on its own terms without being relegated to a secondary status subservient to modern Malayalam. 53

By hybridizing mainly Arabic and Malayalam, Arabi Malayalam presents itself as a parallel road to vernacularization when compared with what might be called, to use Sheldon Pollock’s (1998) phrase, the “cosmopolitan vernacular” of Manipravalam (rubies and coral, signifying the union of Keralabhasha, that is Malayalam, and Sanskrit) that existed in Kerala during the medieval and early modern periods and eventually transformed itself into the modern Malayalam language (S. Kunhanpilla 1978). A “cosmopolitan vernacular” is an already existing high vernacular that attempts to replicate an imperial culture-power formation at the regional level (Pollock 2000, 612). 54 Manipravalam can be construed as the complex appropriation of cosmopolitan language, Sanskrit, into the vernacular Malayalam, which eventually sought to assert its supremacy as the language of the “high,” dominant Hindu castes at the expense of other local, less politically powerful, forms of the vernacular. 55 Arabi Malayalam, in its turn,

53 On a similar debate on the status of Arabi Tamil, see Shuaib Alim (1993). For a view of Arabi Tamil as Tamil merely written in the Arabic script, see Mahroof 1993.
54 For a strong critique of Pollock’s arguments about the cosmopolitan and the vernacular, see Rao 2014. Rao’s book is peppered with criticisms of Pollock’s larger work on the Sanskrit literary traditions of South Asia.
55 The fourteenth-century treatise Lilatilakam, the only surviving descriptive metatext on Maniparavalam, distinguishes between apakrishta (“crude,” “of low stature” spoken by the “ignorant”) and utkrishta (“refined,” “of high stature,” the preserve of the “educated”) varieties of (Kerala) Bhasha (“speech”). Of these, only the latter variety is inducted into Manipravalam. The text also projects the refined variety as the language of the upper castes (trivarnika, the three upper caste-divisions) while associating the crude variety with the inferior or debased castes (hinajati). Kunhanpilla 1955, 75, 298.
appropriates a cosmopolitan language, that is, Arabic, into a vernacular, namely Malayalam. Arabic of course is a cosmopolitan language and Mappilas have also produced a considerable body of literature in Arabic (Hudawi 2014a). The use of Arabic among the Muslims of Kerala as elsewhere in South Asia has largely remained liturgical and theological, though. The term “Malayalam,” it may be worthy of mention here, is very recent in its origins. Speaking of the language of the Land of Malabar in his sixteenth century travelogue, the Portuguese official Duarte Barbosa (c. 1516) writes that in this region “all men use one tongue only which they call ‘Maliama’” (Barbosa [c.1516] 1921, v. ii, 6). Though the word “Malayama” came to be adopted by around the sixteenth century, the first use of the word “Malayalam” occurred only in the eighteenth century (Kunhnapilla 1956, 26). Until around the sixteenth century the common people of Kerala did not more usually have any name other than “Tamil” to call their language. This points to the more relatively modern coinage of “Arabi Malayalam” too, though we have no exact knowledge of by whom and when that word was first brought into being.

Arabi Malayalam Literary Traditions: A Brief Overview

Arabi Malayalam prides itself on an enormous wealth of literature in verse and prose covering a wide range of themes and concerns, and therefore rightly assumes the status of the literary language of Mappilas from at least early seventeenth century when the earliest extant work in

56 For an interesting discussion of the “Arabic cosmopolis” of South and Southeast Asia, see Ricci 2011. Ricci’s focus, however, is on the Tamil-speaking region of Southeast India and the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago, with special reference to Sumatra and Java.  
57 On Arabic as a global, cosmopolitan language, see Ernst 2013. For an overview of the current status of Arabic in India, see Qutbuddin 2007.
this linguistic tradition appeared on the scene (a status it maintained well into the early decades of the twentieth century). Though Arabic, on top of its primary liturgical use, was also the scholarly, cosmopolitan language of the day for the Mappila literati in late medieval and modern Kerala, it had confined itself to the specialized few. In contrast, Arabi Malayalam, thanks to its wider popular appeal, became the literary language of the larger Mappila community in the centuries following the birth of *Muhyiddin Mala* in 1607 such that by the twentieth century Arabi Malayalam had witnessed a stupendous efflorescence of wide-ranging literary activity (Abu 1970; Moulavi and Kareem 1978). Today, with Mappilas’ general progress in Malayalam literacy and modern education, Arabi Malayalam is no longer the literary language of the community, but the legacy of this medium of Mappila literary production is still preserved by way of Arabi Malayalam’s continued use for basic Islamic instruction in a large number of Mappila madrasas across Kerala and through the living contemporary devotional practices among Mappilas of which recitations of Arabi Malayalam texts are an important part. I will have occasion to flesh out this point at some length in the rest of the dissertation.

The rich, diversified world of Arabi Malayalam poetry is better known as “Mappila pattukal” (Mappila songs). As Abu (1970) has noted, the major poetic genres in Arabi Malayalam include *malappattukal, padappattukal, qissappatukal, katthupattukal, kalyanapattukal, and mdhupattukal* (Abu 1970). *Malappattukal*, or simply called *malas*, are largely devotional ballads extolling the life and virtues of Sufi figures. They are also sometimes known as *nerchappattukal* (*nercha* songs; the word “*nercha*” meaning a vow made in honour of a revered Islamic personality such as Sufis, often known as *awliya*, friends of God). While *padappattukal* (war/battle songs) are songs that describe and commemorate battles in early Islamic history as well as in the local history of the Mappila community, *qissappattukal*
designate narrative poems chiefly treating of the life and work of important Islamic figures such as the prophets and of significant events in the history of Islam. Katthupattukal, epistolary songs, are romantic in tone and character and are often written in the form of impassioned exchange of confessions of love and yearning between spouses and lovers. Kalyanappattukal are nuptial songs that mainly describe the marriage between the Prophet Muhammad and his wives, traditionally known as the “Mothers of Believers,” and are particularly sung at weddings.

Finally, Madhupattukal are praise poems to the Prophet Muhammad and Sufi masters. One can go on, adding to this list but the important point is that these are not mutually exclusive taxons; they are only descriptive at best and in many cases the lines distinguishing these sub-genres of Arabi Malayalam poetry from one another are not sharply drawn. Thus, a malappattu might also be thought of as a madhupattu, a praise poem, while one and the same song is often described as a padappattu, a battle song, and as a qissappattu, a historical narrative poem, as in the case Malappuram, a popular Mappila song written by Mahakavi Moyin Kutty Vaidyar (d. 1892), the greatest of the Mappila poets known to history.

The body of Arabi Malayalam writing in prose is equally remarkable. This largely includes translations of and commentaries on the Quran and Hadith, the biographies of the prophets of Islam, accounts of Islamic history, treatises on Islamic jurisprudence, Sufi literature, works of fiction, medical manuals, magazines and newspapers, grammatical texts, and lexicons. Much of the prose writing in Arabi Malayalam is due to translations mainly, though not exclusively, from Arabic (and also from Persian occasionally) such that the whole body of Arabi Malayalam prose has also been known as tarjamakal, that is, translations (Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Kunhi 1982). With considerable increase in the number of Mappila printing presses following the establishment of the first “Muslim” printing press in 1868 by one Theeppoothil
Kunhammad at Thalasseri, a commercial town in Kannur district of Northern Kerala, Arabi Malayalam works began to be produced and circulated on a relatively massive scale (Abu 1970; Moulavi and Kareem 1978). Interestingly, in many a printed Arabi Malayalam work one seldom encounters the name of author and date of composition, but the full details of printing, including the name of the press and of its owner/s, and date and place of printing, are all well stamped.

Before the adoption of printing, there existed a number of professional copyists or scribes who would copy, reproduce and circulate Arabic and Arabi Malayalam manuscripts in large numbers, and this professional group remained active even after the spread of printing in Mappila heartlands in Malabar (Moulavi and Kareem 1978). The dynamics of book production, including the complex processes of composing, copying, publishing, illustrating, binding, selling, storing, and much later, printing Islamic books in Kerala are certainly a fertile area of research clamoring for attention.58

Be that as it may, it is not possible to do justice to the multiplex oeuvre of Arabi Malayalam here; all that I want to stress in passing is that the tremendous corpus of Arabi Malayalam writing that has been available to us since the early seventeenth century on clearly points to the prominence of Arabi Malayalam as the literary language of Mappila Muslims of Kerala from early modern period up to the first half of the twentieth century. There is another crucial point that I also intend to underscore in this context: the vitality and resilience of Arabi Malayalam, as I argue in this study, owes a great deal to the performative dimensions of Mappila literary culture as exemplified in the mala genre of Mappila songs. The practices of composing, circulating, and singing and reciting of the various malas by Mappilas at the heart of which lies

58 Johannes Pedersen’s The Arabic Book (1984, originally published in the Danish in 1946), a fascinating account of the whole world of book production in Arabic in medieval Islamic society, is worthy of mention.
Islamic devotional piety helped fashion a Mappila literary formation. I will demonstrate the historicity of this formation in light of the textual and historical, however limited, sources (see chapter four), while attempting to show the resilience and continued significance of this formation drawing on ethnographic observations (see chapter six). It is to the devotional performance genre of malappattukal constitutive of the Mappila literary formation that I now turn.

Singing One’s Way to Piety: The Mappila “Garland Songs”

The mala (literally “garland”) or malappattu (“garland song”) is a devotional performance ballad that venerates a revered Islamic figure such as a Sufi by narrating the glorious events of his or her life (Abu 1970). Mappila literary culture boasts of numerous malas. However, the most popular of them all include Muhyiddin Mala, Rifaii Mala, and Nafeesath Mala. Of these, Muhyiddin Mala, also called Moideen Mala (the word Moideen being a local corruption of the Arabic name Muhyiddin meaning “the reviver of the faith”), is the first Arabi Malayalam work to have come down to us with known authorship and date of composition. Written by Qadi Muhammad of Calicut (d. 1617), himself a renowned Islamic scholar of his time, in the Malayalam year59 of 782 (1607 AD), Muhyiddin Mala extolls the virtues of the most renowned

59 The beginning of Malayalam calendar, better known by the Malayalam word kolla varsham, is not the same for the entire region of Kerala. In northern Kerala, known as Malabar, it is believed
Sufi figure Shaikh Muhyiddin Abdul Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1167), the founder of the Qadiri Sufi order. *Rifaii Mala* is written in honour of Shaikh Ahmadul Kabeer al-Rifaii (d. 1183) who is the founder of the Rifaii Sufi order. As the *mala* states, it was written in the Malayalam year of 987 (1812 AD), though, unlike *Muhyiddin Mala* and *Nafeesath Mala*, it contains no mention of its author by name. Written by Nalakathu Kunhi Moideen (d.), *Nafeesath Mala* lavishes eulogy on Sayyida Nafeesa or the Lady Nafeesa (d. 824), great-great granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, who lived in Cairo, Egypt and was well-known for her piety and mystical powers.

Interestingly, the *mala* often speaks about itself in lapidary idioms. The trope of garland-weaving also runs through the *mala*. The following passage from *Muhyiddin Mala* is instructive:

> In the (Malayalam) year seven hundred and eighty two, I
> Wove this garland in one hundred and fifty five!
> Like pearls and rubies strung together as a whole
> Wove (*korthen*) I the garland of Muhyiddin, O the people of the world!

(*MM, 281-84*)

that the era started on 25 August 825, whereas in southern Kerala the starting date is said to be 25 July 825. Though there are legends circulating about the birth of the Malayalam calendar in Kerala, we lack any solid evidence to ascertain the veracity of those legends. See Kunhanpilla 1964.

60 All my references from *Muhyiddin Mala* (abbreviated to *MM* in in-text citations) are to the manuscript discovered from the famous Arakkal Palace of Kannur in northern Kerala, a copy of which I obtained from the Library of Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar Mappila Kala Akkadami at Kondotty in Malappuram, Kerala. References are to the lines, not the pages, of *malas*, wherever they appear.
The lapidary tropes such as that of pearls and rubies (muthum manikyavum) found in Muhyiddin Mala have come to symbolize the very lapidary crafting of Arabi Malayalam as a hybrid language in that just as the white pearls and red rubies, for example, come together to form a necklace, two different languages, Arabic and Malayalam, are harmoniously blended to give birth to Arabi Malayalam. This resonates with the trope of rubies and coral captured in the word mani-pravalam that, according to the fourteenth century treatise on the Manipravalam language, is the union of Bhasha and Sanskrit. Unlike Manipravalam, for which the trope of rubies and coral has come to serve as its very name, Arabi Malayalam has not invariably been figured through a stock lapidary image such as muthum manikyavum (pearls and rubies). Nor is there any descriptive metatext after the fashion of the Lilatilakam that lays down the essential features of Arabi Malayalam. Also, the lapidary idioms invoked in malas often slightly vary from text to text. Thus, in Rifaii Mala, instead of rubies we are confronted with diamonds:

In this, as though woven out of a mix of pearls and diamonds,

Wove (korthen) I the garland of homage, O the people of the world!

(RM, 301-2)

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61 “Bhasha sanskritayogo manipravalam” (Manipravalam is the union of Bhasha and Sanskrit; Bhasha here refers to Keralabhasha, the “speech of Kerala”). Lilatilakam in Kunhanpilla 1955, 27; idem, 287.

62 My reference from Rifaii Mala (abbreviated to RM) is to the text of the mala found in the sabeena cited as Brothers n. d., 215-226.
Nevertheless, the *mala* presents us with moments of lapidary figurement which are indicative of the identity of Arabi Malayalam as a mixed language, although there is no explicit self-consciousness of this linguistic hybridity in any given *mala*.

Arguably, the *mala* as a genre assumes the pride of place in the pantheon of Mappila literary culture. This is not only because the first Arabi Malayalam work still in existence belongs to this genre but also that the *mala* has been part and parcel of Mappila devotional life as I show presently. As stated earlier, a *mala* generally refers to a devotional performance ballad that venerates a revered Islamic figure such as a Sufi by narrating the glorious events of his or her life (Abu 1970). However, this is no hard and fast definition in that on this view, a *mala* overlaps with any praise poem written in honour of important Islamic personalities, while such devotional narrative poem as *Nool Mala* of Kunhayin Musliyar (d. c. 1737) that showers praise on the Prophet Muhammad is not considered as an example of the *mala* genre, despite the poem’s titular mention of the word “*mala*” (Abu 1970). Nor does a *mala* exclusively take up as the object of its veneration a Sufi figure as is illuminated by the case of *Mahmood Mala* (1872) which is a laudatory poem on the Prophet Muhammad and yet counts as a “*mala*.” The definitional ambiguity is apparent rather than real, however. While all praise poems can be sung for their meritorious value, the *mala*, I argue, stands apart because it self-reflexively makes an explicit claim to its recitative use and performative value. The following passages from some of the most well-known malas, *Muhyiddin Mala*, *Rifai Mala*, *Nafeesath Mala*, and *Mahmood Mala*, respectively, illustrate this point:

To those who recite (*chonnorkku*) [this mala] without error and omission

Will Lord give a mansion in Paradise.
Whoever copies this (mala) without error,

They will not meet with any misfortune, (you) know full well!

Allah’s blessings (are due) to the one who said like this

And to those who sing and listen to this!

(MM, 275-280)

On those who sing this (mala) well enough (with extreme care and devotion),

Will Allah bestow bounties in plenty!

…To those who sing and listen to this (mala),

Hand the favours of the revered (Shaikh Rifaii), O Allah!!

(RM, 295-96; idem, 307-308)

This mala shall bring blessings, you know!

You will win honour, so sing this with devotion!!

(NM, 239-240)\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{63} NM is the abbreviation for Nafeesath Mala and the reference is to the text of the mala as it appears in the sabeena cited as Brothers n. d., 226-237.
Those who sing this (*mala*) and listen to it,

All those who sing this with extreme devotion,

The one who guides will shower as one to tenfold,

His generous bounties and blessings upon them.

…To those who sing with care and pride,

Lord, gift your pleasure and favour, O Allah!

(*Mahmood Mala*, 285-288; *idem*, 299-300)*

All the reflexive statements on the beneficent effects of the *mala* such as the above are variations on the same theme, namely, the performative use and meritorious value of these texts. The texts consciously proclaim their telos—that is, reciting, singing, and listening to them as intentional acts that would earn the performer funds of divine merit and favour. Thus, it becomes clear that the *mala* establishes itself as a devotional performance genre primarily intended for recitation and singing.

It is possible to glean certain generic conventions of the *mala* from some representative examples such as those mentioned above. *Malas* are usually written in closed couplets in which each couplet forms a complete thought or syntactic unit. For example:

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64 This refers to the text of *Mahmood Mala* printed in the margins of the *sabeena* cited as Brothers n. d., 165-191.


Allah sinehiche Muhyiddin ennovar

Attam illatholam melma udayovar.

(He is the “resuscitator of faith,” beloved of Allah / He is of honour that knows no bounds; *MM*, 19-20).

Masam Rajab irupathelam nalathil

Manikkakallayi pirannu valarnnovar.

(In the month of *Rajab*, on the twenty-seventh day/ Like a ruby, was he born and grew up; *RM*, 249-50).

According to Abu (1970), *malas* by and large range from three hundred to six hundred lines. Many *malas* also contain a statement on their date of composition and number of couplets, and some even identify their authors:

In the (Malayalam) year seven hundred and eighty eight, I,

Wove this garland in one hundred and fifty five (beads).

*(MM, 281-282)*

Like a savant offering guidance

(Sings) the one by the name of Qadi Muhammad,
The one who was born in the region of Calicut,

The one who fashioned all this stringing together!

*(MM, 25-26)*

In that (Malayalam) year, nine hundred and eighty seven,

Wove I this garland in one hundred fifty eight (couplets)!

*(RM, 299-300)*

The sins of mine—Nalakathu Kunhi Moydeen—

Forgive them all and give (me) her protection, O Allah!

*(NM, 243-244)*

All *malas* open with invocations: these include beginning the song by invoking the name of Allah, and uttering prayers and blessings in honour of the Prophet Muhammad and (sometimes) his family and companions:

The sacred name of Allah, praise due to Him, and blessings

With these the Messenger enjoined (us) to begin.

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65 The word “blessings” here is a shorthand for the blessings and greetings upon the Prophet Muhammad that are traditionally invoked by Muslims (after the mention of his name and on other occasions for meritorious reasons), better known as *salawat*, literally, “prayers.”
With the name of Allah, praise, blessings and greetings in order

The Lady Nafeesath Mala I do hereby open.

Upon the great Prophet and his family and companions

Say holy blessings and greetings every day, O the Noble One!

Then follows copious eulogy of the object of veneration by way of dramatically highlighting some of the enviable honours of each of the revered figures in question before we are introduced to the name and biographic details of the extolled. Miracles performed and virtues exemplified by the eulogized thicken the texture of a mala, and calls to follow in the footsteps of the venerated figures punctuate its narrative fabric. For example:

The Master of such honour and renown-

Whither you go, leaving him, my lads?

Everyone’s rooster will cease to crow

But, the Rooster Muhyiddin will crow on till doomsday.
O people longing for the world to come,

Be his (al-Jilani’s) disciple right away!

(MM, 291-296)

Likewise, all *malas* close with a special set of prayers called, *iravu* (literally, “seeking” or “asking”). The *iravus*, sometimes more than one in the same text as in *Nafeesath Mala*, are in addition to the prayers that mark the end of the main body of a *mala*. They often appear under such headings as *ithu iravakunnu* (This is an *iravu*) as in *Rifaii Mala* or *onnamatthe iravakunnu* (This is the first *iravu*) and *randam iravu* (The second *iravu*) as in *Nafeesath Mala*. The *iravus* as a rule are supplications addressed to Allah that seek the help and protection of the revered personalities eulogized in *malas*. The word “Allah” are usually repeated at the end of each couplet making up an *iravu*, before imploring for the beneficence that is thought to reside in the figures around whose life and example *malas* revolve. An example of *iravu* would be instructive here:

In this world and the world to come

Offer us the great Kabeer’s refuge, O Allah!

As long (we) are alive in this world

Offers us the noble Kabeer’s refuge O Allah!

(*Iravu* to *RM*, 1-4)
It may be noted that the repeated mention in *iravu*, an important *mala* convention, of both God and the interceding figure in the same breath complicates the relationship that is enacted between God, and the object of veneration, and the reciter. While the object of veneration is explicitly credited with beneficent and protective powers in passages like this, such powers are tempered by simultaneous invocations to God as well. This serves as a cautionary note against any urge to lump together all instances of saint veneration under “saint worship” as has often been the case with advocates of syncretism like Kunhi (1982) as noted previously. The presence of invocations and merit-confessions in *malas* has also been used by exponents of syncretic Islam in Kerala like Kunhi (1982) to buttress their case for Hindu influence that animates the *mala* tradition of Mappila Muslims. The argument advanced by Kunhi, it may be recalled, is that such invocations are also seen in ancient Hindu hymns and therefore it is safe to suggest that such conventions have travelled from Hindus to Muslims.

This argument is flawed on both grounds. First, it is not at all clear as to how Muslims have taken inspiration from Hindu hymns. For one thing, the invocations found in Hindu hymns and *malas* are fundamentally different in tone, tenor and content. What is common to both is the word *invocation*: as is clear from the specimen of *iravu* quoted above, *malas* are invoking Allah and the revered figures who are venerated in the songs, e.g. Shaikh Rifaii. For another, the invocations found in *malas* unequivocally promulgate the strong Islamic identity of *malas*, and the mere presence of invocations in both different traditions says little about one showing the influence of the other. Second, there is no evidence that such invocations are exclusively and paradigmatically Hindu. Invocation of the name of Allah and saying blessings and greetings upon the Prophet Muhammad are based on nothing other than the Quran and the Prophetic
As for the contentious issues of saintly intercession (or intermediation between God and his subjects) and seeking assistance from revered Islamic figures, both sides of the debate within Islam ground their arguments on *shari’a* (Islamic law) based on four principles or “roots” (*usul*): the Quran, the Hadith or *sunna* (the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), *Ijma’* (scholarly consensus), and *Qiyas*, the method of reasoning by analogy (Schacht 1964; Hallaq 2009).

Given the well-established Islamic tradition of

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66 Cf. “Verily, Allah and his angels invoke blessings on the Prophet. O true believers, invoke blessings upon him and salute him with a respectful salutation” (The Quran, 33: 56) and “Any important task that does not begin in the name of Allah (*bismillahi*) is devoid of blessings”—Hadith cited in *al-Jami’ al-Saghir fi Ahadith al-Bashir al-Nadhir* (The Short Compendium on the Traditions of the Harbinger of Glad Tidings and the Warner) by al-Suyuti (d. 1505), v. ii: 92.

67 A standard Shafii work on *usulul fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence), often used as a key textbook at traditional Islamic institutions of higher learning across Kerala such as degree-level mosque schools, Arabic colleges, and universities, is *Jam’ ul Jawami’* authored by great Shafii scholar Tajuddin al-Subki (d. 1369). I personally had the privilege to read this text in the original under the tutelage of an *usthad* (literally, any teacher, but used exclusively to refer to an Islamic teacher-scholar), himself a graduate of mosque school and Arabic college, on my undergraduate programme in Islamic studies at Darul Huda Islamic University, formerly an academy, at Chemmad in Malappuram district of Kerala. The pedagogy of these institutions mainly involves going word by word through texts or portions thereof which the disciple usually reads out to the *usthad* and analyzing them from inside out with the aid of relevant commentaries (*shuruh*; sing. *sharah*) and supercommentaries (*havashi*; sing. *hashiya*). The much sought-after goal of reading a text with an *usthad* is well captured by the time-honored phrase used in religious circles “*kitab tiriyuka*” (“to understand book/s”; the phrase actually connotes the ability to successfully work through the intricacies of a text rather than gain a general sense of it), which has come to mark the coveted achievement of a prospective, well respected Islamic scholar, popularly called *Musliyar*. I note this point not so much to drop names as to call attention to the vibrant culture of traditional Islamic learning in Kerala which lays a great amount of emphasis on classic jurisprudential texts in the Shafii school of Islamic law and which seeks to produce religious leaders who are especially trained to defend contentious rites such as shrine visitation and saint veneration through authoritative citational practices. In the university I mentioned above, practice debates on controversial theological issues are an important part of the training students receive so that the oratorical and debating skills of the prospective *ulama* could be honed professionally. In one of such mock debates I participated in 2003-4, the motion of debate concerned the religious legitimacy of collectively, rather than individually, performing the supererogatory litany following the five daily ritual prayers (*salawat*). For a brief overview of traditional Islamic institutions in Kerala, better known as madrasas, see Kuzhiyan 2013. For a spirited defense of saint veneration vis-à-vis devotional poetry from the perspective of “traditional” Sunni Mappilas, see the detailed commentary on *Muhyiddin Mala* by Faizy 2002.
invocations, it is wise to hold that such conventions of the *mala* are Islamic in both character and inspiration.\(^6^8\) Moreover, such conventions also reinforce the meritorious value of the *mala* genre.

It is not definitively known as to when the *mala* as a genre was first introduced in Arabi Malayalam. However, there is reason to believe that *mala* (or *malai* as in Tamil) as a popular genre was part of the larger Tamil and Malayalam literary cultures. Tamil Muslim hagiographic literature is home to numerous laudatory poems bearing the title “*malai.*” Some of these *malais* are said to predate the early seventeenth century when the earliest of the extant Arabi Malayalam *malas* was authored. For example, according to M. M. Uwise, *Palchanda Malai*, the earliest extant example of Islamic Tamil literature, albeit with unknown authorship and date, is assumed to have been composed before the twelfth century on the basis of the “internal evidence” available in the existing eight verses of this work (Uwise 1990: 1-4).\(^6^9\) *Mikurasu Malai*, another significant Tamil Muslim literary work written by one Alippulavar and dated to 1590, a period not far from the date of the earliest extant Arabi Malayalam work, *Muhyiddin Mala* of 1607, deals with *mi’raj* (as suggested by the name “*mikurasu*”, the Tamilized form of the Arabic word “*mi’raj*”), the heavenly ascension of the Prophet Muhammad (Uwise 1990: 19-24). More importantly, very recently in 1980, Purushothaman Nair discovered and published what seems to be one of the earliest Malayalam works in the *Pattu* (literally “song”) style that could be dated to

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\(^6^8\) I am not denying that some Muslim authors were influenced by Hindu literature. In fact, my interest is not in unpacking who is influencing whom. The significant point I am raising is that the invocation has an Islamic genealogy, too, and that the unequivocal notion that it comes from Hindu literature is misplaced.

\(^6^9\) J. B. P. More (2004), who contests the Muslim authorship of *Palchanda Malai*, has argued that since this work contains no Arabic and Persian words, its author is a Hindu. However, More’s contention, like that of Uwise’s which he questions, is no less speculative at best.
the twelfth century or so. This work, called Tirunizhalmala (Garland of the holy shade), employs local meters and an exclusively Dravidian orthography, and describes the ritual life of a local temple. All said, it becomes plausible to conclude that the Arabi Malayalam mala is not a phenomenon isolable from the larger literary cultures of Tamil and Malayali societies and that Mappilas appropriated an already popular generic form in Kerala in order to give expression to the importance of their religion and their life-world.

Various malas which treat of important Islamic figures so beloved and revered of Mappilas are sung for their meritorious value. These malas freely circulate in cheap lithographed and printed prayer books that still grace many Mappila households. Saint veneration as embodied in the recitation of the mala is the prominent form of piety in the Mappila literary formation. I demonstrate this point in the following chapter by focusing on Muhyiddin Mala—a text that is regarded as the best representative not only of the mala genre but the whole of Arabi Malayalam poetry.

The “Pattu” style or genre, often called a literary school or movement in scholarship on Malayalam literature, is exclusively Dravidian in orthography, meters, and patterns of consonance and assonance in contrast to the heavily Sanskritized Manipravalam. No neat definition of Pattu can be gleaned from the Lilatilakam, though it sketchily lays down certain features of the Pattu form against which Maniparavalam is to be construed. See Kunhanpilla 1955: 64-67. However, Kerala scholars have usually talked about the origins and development of Malayalam literature along a dichotomy of the Pattu movement versus the Manipravalam movement by deploying these two “opposites” as the rubrics to analyze the whole of Malayalam literary tradition. Rich Freeman (2003) questions what he calls the “projected dichotomy of Manipravalam and Pattu” by arguing that “there is little historical basis for posing Pattu as a self-designated and conscious movement of literary production, that its descriptive basis is largely in negative contrast with Manipravalam, and that its real function is only to reify contemporary narratives of indigenism by providing them with a categorical taxon” (Freeman 2003, 449).